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# The Poetry of Female Radicalism in Depression-Era America

by

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Dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in American  
Studies,

University of Sussex,

January 2012.

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The Poetry of Female Radicalism in Depression-Era America

Summary

This thesis examines womens' poetry of the radical Left and organised labour movement of the Depression-Era United States and investigates the relationship between poetry and politics during this period. In so doing, it shows that women poets were concerned with precisely that problem: of poetry's political function. The work of individual poets and the acts of collective cultural production explored in this thesis articulate a radical, politically transformative poetics at a time when the continued existence of poetry was perceived to be under threat from scientific advance and wider cultural changes.

Juxtaposing analysis of Left modernist poets with poets of the labour movement, the chapters focus on three individual poets including Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980), Genevieve Taggard (1894-1948) and Miriam Tane (1916-2007). To provide an understanding of the role of poetry within a specific political movement and to establish the context in which Tane's poetry was produced, two chapters are included which analyse the educational culture and the collective cultural production of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. One chapter focuses on the history of the ILGWU's educational and cultural activities and the other analyses collections of poetry which the union produced.

This thesis challenges the existing paradigm in which the study of American radical Left and labour poetry has been isolated from any broader enquiry about its relationship to class, American political history and also to literary modernism. This thesis advances two main arguments: that the poets considered in this thesis conceived of poetry as a politically transformative force; that these politically transformative understandings of poetry were rooted in an engagement with the ideological and material contexts of the social movements to which these writers belonged.

Furthermore, this thesis considers poetry in terms of the material context of its publication, and the political uses to which it was put.

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## **Bibliographical Note**

The in-text parenthetical citations, quotations, figure captions and Bibliography have been formatted according to the Modern Language Association Style Guide, 7<sup>th</sup> edition (2009). The margins, paragraph spacing, font size and pagination of the text have been formatted in accordance with the guidelines stipulated in the University of Sussex Doctoral School Handbook (2010-2011). However, because most of the poems cited in this thesis come from archival sources and cannot be considered in the terms of the MLA as “commonly cited,” and in order to provide consistency, in-text parenthetical citations of poetry do not give line numbers, rather they refer to the full bibliographic information given in the thesis Bibliography.

...*She speaks from all these faces*  
*and from the center of a system of lives*  
*who speak the desire of worlds moving unmade.*

- Muriel Rukeyser, "Ann Burlak," 1938.

## **Introduction**

### **0.1 From Utopia to the Dinner Table: A Discussion of the Political and Cultural Context**

"Let us embark for Utopia and be back in plenty of time for the next meal!" cry socialists Lucia Trent and Ralph Cheyney in *More Power to Poets!* (67). Their succinct injunction creates no distinction between the necessities of food and idealism, highlighting the rootedness of a contemporary Utopian ideal in the material circumstances out of which it arose. In this respect, Trent and Cheyney's plea acknowledges the twin concerns that underpinned proletarian poetry of the 1930s, in which the commitment to a radical political vision met with the necessity of expressing this commitment in terms of the pragmatic, material concerns of everyday life. Utopia exists in this statement as a curiously ulterior space which has not yet been achieved but is not wholly distant from the present either, an ideal space within reach of both now and the next meal. The statement supplies the reader with a temporal scale of idealism present in the minds of two socialist poets in 1934. The Utopia aimed at is "Not Plato's Utopia, but a Utopia where poets will be welcomed, a poets' Utopia!" (Trent and Cheyney 67). Trent and Cheyney's desire for "A poets' Utopia" is conceived in terms of a reaction to the contemporary working situation of poets in the United States. In their chapter "A Poets' Utopia" Trent and Cheyney lament that "America does not banish poets, but she does very little to make them feel at home" and that "current conditions for most of us are not such as to permit us to give the best that is in us to poetry and through poetry to our fellow citizens" (67, 71). The "current conditions" which they address are both economic and intellectual; demonstrating their understanding that political idealism is inextricably tied to the conditions of imaginative capability. Outlining a programme for the realisation of Utopia, Trent and Cheyney argue that "there are countless very important little things" that must be achieved, including the "Ability for the poorest poet to travel often and widely, to commune with

the sea and mountains at will.... Bird-song and leaf-tapestries within a few minutes walk” (72). Ultimately exclaiming that “There are countless big things!” which must be granted the poet, the rhetoric employed here shows that Trent and Cheyney’s understanding of the relationship between politics and poetry is tied to questions of American national identity. While for Emerson, famously, America is a poem that “dazzles the imagination,” Trent and Cheyney issue a political challenge to poets to remake the nation as a site in which the imagination can be more fully exercised, transgressing America as it is presently imagined. They assert, “The developments outlined in this article would work wonders toward transforming the United States into a poets’ Utopia and a Utopia for everyone else” (73). Moreover, the journey to Utopia and back in time for the next meal is here understood as both necessary and imminent, “it is not a question of whether mankind will ever reach a Utopia,” but “only of *how soon*” (Trent and Cheyney 73).

The urgency of Trent and Cheyney’s tone in the chapters “A Poets’ Utopia” and “Make America Safe for Poetry” elucidates the wider debate in the 1930s, in which the continued existence of poetry was seen to be under threat from cultural and economic changes such as the advance of science, mass media and capitalism. In the opening chapter to *More Power to Poets*, entitled “But Poetry *Is* Practical,” Trent and Cheyney argue that the English writer and critic Clifford Bax puts “the attitude of the vast majority of the people into words” when he argued that “The arts are vestigial; and those of us who still care more for a picture than for a motor-car, for a book of poems than for a double-barrelled gun are survivors of a bygone stage in human development” (qtd. in Trent and Cheyney 8). Emphasising this point, they state directly to the reader that “this is the U.S.A., 1934, and poets have gone out in most people’s opinion just like the horse and buggy” (53). As Joseph Harrington highlights in his article “Why American Poetry is Not American Literature,” this anxiety surrounding the decline of poetry was echoed in the popular press. Harrington writes, “As early as 1923 the *New Republic* lamented that ‘[s]ix million people go daily to the movies ... At most a few dozen gather together here and there at the same time to listen to poetry or to talk about it’” (“American Poetry” 502). The perception that even the educated public was less and less willing to read poetry, Harrington argues, “provided the rationale for a formalist poetry that, as [John Crowe] Ransom wrote, ‘a small company of adept readers enjoys, perhaps enormously, but the general public detests’” (“American

Poetry” 21). In this context, the claims which Left poets such as Trent and Cheyney make regarding the practicality of poetry can be read as a response to a more widespread concern that the role of poetry in society was in a state of terminal decline.

The debate about the changed nature of the relations between the arts and sciences assumed particular importance for the literary Left, as writers, critics and intellectuals debated the role that culture would play in political revolution. Like Bax, the then socialist philosopher, critic and poet Max Eastman articulated the view that poetry was under threat from scientific advance. In *The Literary Mind — Its Place in an Age of Science* (1931) Eastman argued that “science, having displaced magic and religion and abstract philosophy as a source of help and guidance, is now successfully attacking ‘literature’” (11). In England, Eastman’s intellectual opponent, the critic I. A. Richards, similarly addressed his attention to the “representative modern view . . . that the future of poetry is *nil*,” that “the inevitable effect of the advance of science would be to destroy the possibility of poetry” (7, 8). Poetry, in particular among the arts, was seen to be uniquely under threat. As an archaic art form which dealt with aesthetic relations and the “experienced quality of things,” it stood in the way of the utilitarian scientific endeavour of identifying and transcribing a “conception of things which brings out their relation to other things and to our purposes” (212).

For writers on the Left, the increased specialization of thought brought about by the advance of science and technology presented a direct political challenge. The Scottish Communist poet Hugh MacDiarmid voiced a widespread anxiety that intellectual specialisation would prevent humankind from realising its true revolutionary potential. In his poem “The Second Hymn to Lenin” he criticises the “anti-human forces that have instilled the thought/ That knowledge has outrun the individual brain/ till trifling details only can be brought/ Within the scope of any man” resulting in a state of political torpor in which “a general sense of impotence compels/ Most men in petty grooves to be confined” (“The Second Hymn to Lenin”).

Trent and Cheyney shared MacDiarmid’s concern that the increased specialisation of knowledge leads to the development of a technocratic society in which ordinary people “fall deeper and deeper into standardized patterns of thought and feeling” (8). In Trent and Cheyney’s eyes, poetry is itself in danger of falling victim to this process of the mechanisation of “thought and feeling,” the alienation and

instrumentalisation of the imagination itself in the face of modern American capitalism. Like MacDiarmid, Trent and Cheyney stress the significance of poetry as a powerful force capable of resisting the increasingly constrained conditions of thought present in contemporary society. They state clearly that “Poetry is practical because it demands participation. A poem is no pre-digested thought” and that “It does not call upon you to buy some mass product, accept some mass product” (10). As an imaginative force resistant to the intellectual exigencies of capitalism, poetry also, in their view, “fosters participation and simultaneously helps you break loose from old patterns of thought and feeling” (11). Ultimately, the economic and cultural circumstances of 1930s America created a situation in which the role of poetry in society was rendered radically indeterminate. While a source of critical anxiety, this indeterminacy also provided an impetus for writers on the Left to conceive of and put into practice a new pragmatic, socially engaged understanding of poetry.

## **0.2 Remembering Anew: The Position of the Thesis in Relation to Existing Criticism**

In this thesis, I examine womens’ poetry of the radical Left and the organised labour movement of the 1930s and early 1940s to investigate the way in which these writers developed a socially engaged poetic understanding and praxis, and also explore the relationship of their work to political and cultural movements. The poets who are the subject of my analysis are Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980), Genevieve Taggard (1894-1948), and Miriam Tane (1916-2007). In addition to chapters focussing on these individual writers, I include one chapter which discusses the educational and literary culture of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU), to which Miriam Tane belonged, and another which discusses and analyses specific collections of poetry produced by the ILGWU.

In *Repression and Recovery*, Cary Nelson argued that during the 1930s, “writing poetry became a credible form of revolutionary action” (32). How did the poets included in this study conceive of the relationship between poetry and politics, and how were these understandings manifested in their poetry? Analysing poetry in relation to the political and cultural movements with which each writer was associated, I assess the extent to which the poetry considered was being used as a means to provide social critique and to instigate radical political change, thereby testing Nelson’s claim.

The relationship between politics and aesthetics was a particularly fraught issue for the Literary Left during the 1930s. Writers and critics associated with the Communist Party debated the relationship between aesthetics and political commitment in heated terms. These debates came to a head during the mid to late thirties, when critics William Phillips and Philip Rahv broke off relations with the CPUSA and attacked its cultural politics in the pages of the periodical *Partisan Review*, which they founded in 1934. Phillips and Rahv attacked the political dogmatism of *New Masses* critics such as Joshua Kunitz, Granville Hicks and Mike Gold who argued against literary innovation as a valid means of expressing revolutionary spirit. This hard-line “leftist” critical position is encapsulated in Joshua Kunitz’s argument in the *New Masses* article “Literary Wars in the U.S.S.R.” that the proletariat “did not want the head of Lenin to look like a cube or a horse to look like a triangle” (13). Alan Wald summarized the position of *Partisan Review* intellectuals of the late 1930s thus, “Phillips and Rahv arrived at a new assessment of the relationship of revolutionary politics and radical literature. Above all, they concluded that writers and critics must be free of all partisan political and organisational pressure” (qtd. in Thurston 8). However, as Michael Thurston argues, the philosophies behind such judgments “are implicated in political agendas of their own” (9). Thurston continues, “Justifiably dismayed by Communist Party control over left-wing writers, Phillips and Rahv move to articulate a new, anti-Communist revolutionary aesthetic ... that requires as its “other” a concrete manifestation ... of the political writing they repudiate,” casting in that position the proletarian movement in literature (9).

Phillips and Rahv’s model gained a strong degree of critical purchase. Their view that political poetry was seen to equal bad poetry resonated with the New Criticism of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, whose decoupling of poetry from politics developed precisely in reaction to the Marxist criticism that had emerged during the 1930s. In this respect, as Barbara Foley argues, “U.S. literary Marxists can be seen as wholly complicit in defining –or at least as wholly inadequate in combating – the aesthetic that would facilitate their eventual banishment from the annals of American literary history” (167). Foley continues that ““the heresy of the didactic,’ the New Critics’ oft-repeated slogan, merely rationalized the plethora of pejorative vocabulary” that radicals had used to criticise themselves (167).

The assumption that political poetry is bad poetry has had an enduring impact within the American academy. Critics such as Nelson and Paul Lauter have demonstrated the way in which the suppression of political poetry became central to the cultural conflicts that emerged from and helped underwrite the Cold War. Nelson argues that, “The effort to separate poetry and politics was not simply part of a discourse internal to literary studies but rather a part of the public positioning and defence of literariness... [The Academy] protected itself by a theoretical severing of poetry and politics” (*Revolutionary Memory* 66). The ideas exemplified by Brooks and Warren provided legitimacy to literary study at a time when, as Lauter argues, “In the context of rising tension with the Soviet Union ... and a general suspicion of dissent, much less anything categorizable as “deviance,” socially engaged writing (or even thought) became suspect” (“Cold War Culture” 241). Indeed, one need only reflect on the fact that the FBI kept files on a range of writers associated with the American Left, including Rukeyser, to appreciate the political stakes which were involved in the policing of literature. Rukeyser’s FBI file provides uncanny insight into the politics of reading in mid-twentieth century America, as the agents’ notes indicate that they scoured the pages of *New Masses* for material, and tried to assess the political significance of poems like “The Cornfield” and “The Disease” (FBI Records). In this climate of fear and suspicion, the apolitical understanding of poetry promoted by Brooks and Warren came to dominate within the American academy. As Lauter argues, “In a way, the most striking testimonial to the impact of Brooks and Warren’s work is the silent grip it has retained upon ideas of a modernist canon and the appropriate approaches to its study” (“Cold War Culture” 245).

Recent revisionist literary history, however, has shown the dominant critical understanding of the division between political poetry and modernism to have been founded on an unstable basis. As Barbara Foley and James Murphy have shown, the picture of two camps centred on *New Masses* and *Partisan Review* is an oversimplification of the critical debate which took place within the Left during the 1930s. Indeed, in *The Proletarian Moment*, Murphy foregrounds the fact that Rahv, Phillips and other *Partisan Review* critics had themselves written “leftist” criticism denouncing the value of formal experimentation during the early 1930s (151). Moreover, as Murphy shows, Rahv and Phillips ignore the prior anti-leftist writings of Joseph Freeman which were published in the *Daily Worker* as early as 1933, as part of



their project of casting proletarian literature as the “other” of their vision of revolutionary expression (133). Like Murphy, Foley challenges the critical model of two distinct, warring camps, arguing that when Rahv and Phillips “launched their assault against “leftism” in 1934, they were in fact repeating arguments that had been made previously in the pages of *New Masses* by party stalwarts such as Gold, Freeman, [Moissaye] Olgin and [Granville] Hicks” (140). Murphy and Foley’s work has been valuable in complicating a reductive understanding of the critical debate surrounding the relationship between modernism and political poetry among writers associated with the CPUSA during the 1930s, showing the dividing line between modernism and political poetry to have been blurred from the outset.

My thesis adds to the growing number of studies, such as Nelson’s *Repression and Recovery* and *Revolutionary Memory*, Kalaidjian’s *American Culture between the wars* (1994), and Thurston’s *American Political Poetry Between the Wars* (2001), which examine American political poetry of the early twentieth century. These relatively recent studies have recovered the work of writers like Edwin Rolfe and Muriel Rukeyser, which had been either forgotten or neglected. Despite the recovery work undertaken in the latter decades of the twentieth century, there remains a lack of scholarship devoted to considering the relationship between modernism, political poetry, and the work of those who did not publish in conventional literary journals or books and who may not have considered themselves primarily poets or writers but who wrote material vital to understanding the role of poetry within the American Left more generally. As Mark Van Wienen writes, there remains a “chasm between critics’ commitment to politicize their readings of literary texts and their willingness to study literary texts that are themselves consciously fashioned to political ends” (231). A notable exception to this neglect is Marsh’s *You Work Tomorrow* (2010), the first modern anthology to bring together a range of poetry originally printed in a variety of trade union publications during the interwar period. As Marsh describes in his introduction to this anthology, the critical attention which has been devoted to the thirties literary Left since the 1980s has focussed on “those literary and cultural figures who may have sympathized with, identified with, and sought to advance the interests of the workers, but who nevertheless considered themselves primarily writers, directors, performers, or other culture workers” (*You Work Tomorrow* 3). Moreover, the critical focus of seminal studies such as Foley’s *Radical Representations*, Paula Rabinowitz’s

*Labor and Desire* and Alan Wald's *Exiles from a Future Time*, remained on "the sphere of writers and artists affiliated with, fellow-travelling with, or reacting against the Communist Party and its various literary organs and programs" (*You Work Tomorrow* 4-5). The result has been, as Marsh attests, that "recent anthologists and critics have tended to neglect individuals who considered themselves workers and organizers first and poets and writers second – if at all – but who nevertheless produced ... much work of literary value and interest" (*You Work Tomorrow* 4). In this respect, the pronouncement made by Paula Rabinowitz in 1991 that "the 1930s appear simultaneously as the most remembered and most forgotten decade in American cultural history" still resonates today (17).

This neglect of the literary and cultural products of workers and labour organisers constitutes a gap at the heart of both the history of modern American poetry and the history of the American labour movement. This neglect is extraordinary considering the energy and resources which American working people channelled into cultural production during the 1930s. The neglect of 30s labour poetry points to the failure of even class-based literary study of the 30s to incorporate poetry into its analysis. James Smethurst notes in his review of John Lowney's *History, Memory and the Literary Left – Modern American Poetry: 1935-1968* (one of the few recent studies devoted exclusively to an analysis of poetry) that "poetry has received short shrift in the comparative boom of scholarship on the artistic Left of the 1930s and 1940s over the last fifteen or twenty years" (787). Scholars focussed on the issue of class, such as Eric Schocket, turn their attention instead to prose as a more readily historicised source. In "Why American Poetry is Not American Literature," Harrington argues that the continued neglect of poetry within American Studies, and cultural studies more widely, both reflects and reproduces the New Critical hypostatization of poetry. Harrington argues that "the corollary of poetry's hypostatization is the notion that fiction provides a privileged access to history," and that "to the extent that Americanists reflexively turn to representations within fiction, their enterprise becomes as textualist-formalist as the New Critics' privileging of the structure of poetry" (509). Although historicizing criticism of American poetry has been produced since Harrington's article, there remains a notable lack of scholarship pertaining to the relationship between modernism and the poetry of the American labour movement. This neglect has prevented a full understanding of the history of American poetry to be developed.

Furthermore, the assumption that “we go to novels to find historical reality” also underpinned the body of feminist criticism pertaining to the American literary Left which was produced in the 80s and 90s. Rabinowitz’s *Labor and Desire* (1991), Constance Coiner’s *The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel LeSueur* (1998), Barbara Foley’s *Radical Representations* (1993) Deborah Rosenfelt’s article “From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition” (1981) and Maria Lauret’s *Liberating Literature* (1994) all focussed on novels in their reclamation and assessment of the work of female writers associated with the CPUSA. Louise Kertesz’s *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser* (1980) was the exception to this rule. It was only later, in the first decade of the twentieth century that Left female poets received greater critical attention, with the publication of monographs including Nancy Berke’s *Women Poets on the Left* (2001) and Tim Dayton’s *Muriel Rukeyser’s The Book of the Dead* (2003). As with the scholarship on American political poetry of the interwar period produced at the end of the twentieth century, however, the scholarship on Left womens’ poetry of the 30s focussed on those writers whose work had been published in conventional literary formats, ignoring the work of those writers published in trade union magazines or periodicals. The feminist criticism of the 90s focussed on the gendered terms in which Left intellectuals debated the social role of literature during the 1930s. Rabinowitz, for example, argued that writers associated with the Left conceived of proletarian literature as a distinctly masculine phenomenon, beginning with Mike Gold’s attack on Thornton Wilder in the *New Republic* in which he described the author as “the prophet of the genteel Christ” (22). Rabinowitz argues that the construction of proletarian fiction as an essentially “masculine” genre allowed Left intellectuals to stake a claim in the vigorous, macho arena of contemporary American politics. Literary radicals, she writes, “portrayed themselves in extremely masculine terms in order to combat their marginalization within both leftist and American culture by metaphorically identifying themselves with the masculine proletariat” (37). While providing a useful insight into the gendered discourse in which Left intellectuals debated proletarian literature, Rabinowitz’s critical approach in *Labor and Desire* reproduced the reductive gendered critical framework that she set out to debunk. Her understanding of proletarian literature as an essentially “masculine” genre leads her to argue that female writers on the Left operated in a separate sphere from that of men, and that womens’ revolutionary fiction can be regarded as a “secondary zone” of literary radicalism (64). In reproducing the terms of literary debate that she sets out to critique, Rabinowitz’s

analysis fails to account for the vital and critical engagement of female writers with the political movements with which they were associated. Undermining the premise of this approach, Muriel Rukeyser's 1939 poem "Ann Burlak" -the title referring to the contemporaneous Communist Party activist -expresses the active, crucial engagement of women with Left political culture. Rukeyser describes that Burlak spoke, "from the center of a system of lives/ who speak the desire of worlds moving unmade" ("Ann Burlak"). Rukeyser elides Burlak's speech with that of the masses, who are presented here as the embodied expression of unrealised social longing. Both Burlak and the poet herself speak from the "center of a system of lives," not from a secondary zone of political or cultural radicalism.

Moreover, the focus within feminist criticism of the 90s on female writers who were in some way associated with the Communist Party isolated an assessment of their work from any consideration of its engagement with cultural production within the Left more generally or indeed from wider American literary culture. In this respect, the critical focus of 90s feminist criticism on the gender politics and female cultural production centred on the CPUSA maintained rather than destabilised the position of communist womens' literature as the "other" of American literary history. In so far as 90s feminist criticism focussed on fiction, Left womens' poetry remained doubly estranged from American literary history. Within labour history, furthermore, scholars have continued to reproduce the traditional male framework of the discipline and, as Kessler-Harris argues, "the language of "work" and "workers" still conjures male images" (10). Furthermore, Kessler-Harris argues that "the tendency of labor history" has been "to separate historians of women from those of labour and to exclude women's activities from a direct relationship to class and class formation" (147). Womens' poetry of the American Left, therefore, has been excluded as a central concern of labour history, as it has been from literary history.

### **0.3 Tracing the Contours of Silence: The Scope and Methodology of the Thesis**

My thesis is written with the intent to redress the fundamental gaps in literary scholarship outlined above. My work furthers an understanding of the relationship between American modernism and the poetry of the labour movement, and contributes to a fuller understanding of the position of women's poetry within the cultural production of the American Left. I achieve this by juxtaposing analysis of the

modernist poetry of Rukeyser and Taggard with poetry produced under the auspices of the ILGWU.

Muriel Rukeyser and Genevieve Taggard both had collections of their work published during their lifetime. Rukeyser published a number of volumes of poetry during the 1930s and early 1940s, including *Theory of Flight* (1935), *U.S.I* (1938), *A Turning Wind* (1939) and *Wake Island* (1942). Taggard's published collections of this period include *Not Mine to Finish: Poems 1928-1934* (1934), *Calling Western Union* (1936), *Collected Poems, 1918-1938* (1938), and *Long View* (1942). In addition to these collections, however, Rukeyser and Taggard's poetry was also published in the Communist periodical *New Masses*. In analysing their work, I draw on both their published collections and their poetry as it was printed in *New Masses*, in order to assess their work in relation to the different contexts in which it would have been most widely distributed and read at the time of original publication. In undertaking research on Rukeyser and Taggard, I accessed the *New Masses* archive at Sussex University.

No collection of poetry produced by the ILGWU has yet been printed or distributed outside of the original context of its publication. The only modern publication of ILGWU poetry is to be found in Marsh's anthology *You Work Tomorrow: An Anthology of American Labor Poetry, 1929-1941* (2010), which reproduces a small selection of ILGWU poets' work. The ILGWU poetry which I discuss in this thesis was obtained during two research trips to the Tamiment Library, New York University in March 2010 and between September to November 2011. During these trips, I collected the 112 poems written by Tane which were published in *Justice* from 1939-1946. I also collected booklets and pamphlets of poetry produced by the ILGWU's central Educational Department, including *Garment Workers Speak* (1940), *Poems by and for Workers* (1941) and *The History of the ILGWU in Song and Poem* (1957). My analysis and assessment of ILGWU poetry is necessarily conditioned by the body of material which I was able to obtain in the course of my limited time in the archive. Although restricted by time and resources, the substantial volume of material which I acquired at the Tamiment Library provides ample grounds for discussion.

Analysing poetry published in both conventional and non-conventional formats, my thesis provides a more holistic assessment of the relationship between poetic and

political praxis than has yet been provided in existing literary scholarship or cultural histories of the labour movement. I provide historicist readings of the poetry considered, melding literary analysis with discussions of the surrounding social and cultural history in order to make wider comments, and unveil larger resonances pertaining to the relationship between American poetry and political culture during the 30s and 40s. Focussing on a period in which the role of poetry in society was rendered radically unstable by economic and cultural developments, I explore the ways in which women poets of the American Left conceived of poetry as a dynamic, politically transformative force.

In the course of my assessment of the revolutionary import of the poetry considered, I investigate the way in which the political context of the work informs the poets' aesthetic practice. In investigating the relationship between politics and aesthetics, I draw on Harrington and Walter Kalaidjian's concern to write against the grain of a critical legacy which continues to evaluate poetry primarily on aesthetic grounds. In *Poetry and the Public*, Harrington describes a scholarly climate in which, although the study of fiction has benefited from the opening up of the canon, allowing for "the question of quality" to become less central, the historical construction of poetry in the United States as an idealized genre and preserve of the academy "continues to make the demand for [aesthetic] evaluation unavoidable" (*Poetry and the Public* 3). But only to ask the question "is it any good?" in relation to political poetry of the 1930s yields little insight into the claims which such poetry made to change people's views of the relationship between self and society, and to effect political change. My analysis ties aesthetic evaluation to an assessment of such claims, building on Kalaidjian's argument that "a more productive approach" to the study of thirties poetry would "consider how depression-era poetry actually functioned as a potent catalyst for changing views of self and society" (52). In analysing work printed in the format of newspapers and trade union booklets, I am attentive to the textual and material contexts in which the poems are found. In my reading of Taggard's poetry printed in *New Masses*, Tane's poetry in *Justice* and of ILGWU poetry booklets, I attend to what Jerome McGann in *The Textual Condition* refers to as "the bibliographic text," the material aspects of a textual artefact (105). Reading poetry in the original context of its publication, my discussion takes into account factors including the spatial location of the poem on the page, its relationship with surrounding articles/poems/advertisements,

and the extra-diegetic bibliographic features of archival material such as glued-in insertions, annotations and commentary. In so doing, I draw on Thurston's argument that the signification of a poem depends not only on the poem itself, or "things politically engaged agents do *in poems*," but also "the things political agents do *with poems*," the material and political usages to which the poem is put (20). As Thurston elaborates, "the textual acts of poems occur in the context of other acts, textual and otherwise" and the material aspects of a poem's publication inform the interpretative strategies of readers and point to the broader discursive context in which the poem was positioned (20).

The American Left novelist Tillie Olsen begins her critical work *Silences* (1978) by stating, "Literary history and the present are dark with silences: some the silences for years by our acknowledged great; some silences hidden; some the ceasing to publish after one work appears; some the never coming to book form at all" (6). In the discussion above, I have outlined some of the cultural and political factors that have contributed to the relative critical silence which surrounds most of the work examined in this thesis. My interest in this marginalised body of work has been informed by Olsen's committed assertion in *Silences* of the value of much neglected material, challenging the assumption that work is forgotten because it is no good. Indeed, *Silences* is a comprehensive and wide-ranging account of the many reasons why work is forgotten or overlooked, and of the myriad circumstantial factors which prevent many lives, particularly those of women, from achieving creative fruition. Olsen writes that by "silences" she does not refer to "*natural* silences – what Keats called *agonie ennuyeuse*" but to "unnatural" silences, the "thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot" (6). Olsen also suggests that critics who recognise that critical silence does not equate to literary failure have a duty to "bear witness to what was (and still is) being lost" (6). Following on from this, Nelson's work in *Repression and Recovery* and *Revolutionary Memory* has shown that alongside the duty to bear witness to marginalised literature sits the important task of interrogating the political factors which determine the critical practices which have contributed to the silence in some areas of scholarship, and the noise in others. Exploring the significance of the cultural conflicts of the cold war in shaping the formation of the American canon in the post-war period, Nelson argues that "The canon as it now exists serves as much to prevent ... us from reading certain kinds of texts ... as to ensure that what we have judged to be the

best literature will continue to be read” (*Repression* 51). Arguing that the kind of texts people are discouraged from reading are those which are overtly political, Nelson concludes by arguing that, “We should always read what people assure us is no good” (*Repression* 51). This thesis responds to Nelson’s call, examining texts which have received relatively little critical assessment or have yet to be brought within the purview of scholarly evaluation. In choosing to discuss texts which have received little scholarly attention, I share Nelson’s commitment to investigating what the very fact of the critical silence surrounding these texts can reveal about the historical relationship between American political and literary culture. An important factor in the selection of these texts, then, was the fact that they had mostly been ignored.

As I argued in the preceding discussion, the lack of scholarship pertaining to womens’ poetry of the American Left and labour movement leaves significant gaps in our knowledge of the innovative and exciting ways in which writers such as Rukeyser, Taggard, and Tane conceived of the relationship between poetry and politics, and wrote poetry commensurate with those understandings. The scope of the work examined in this thesis was chosen with the intent of redressing the key critical failures outlined above: the isolation of discussion of the literary culture of the American Communist Party from any consideration of its relationship to the cultural production of the Left more generally; the continued neglect of 30s political poetry and historicised accounts of its social role; the relationship of 30s political poetry with modernism; and the marginalisation of discussion of womens’ and labour poetry within the existing scholarship.

In this thesis, I deliberately choose to juxtapose analysis of work by Left intellectuals whose work was published in conventional formats with that of labour poets whose work was published in trade union publications. Through this juxtaposition, the scope and methodology of the thesis redress the critical imbalance present in the last wave of scholarship on 30s political literature which was produced during the 1990s. Instead of contributing to an over-determined body of criticism which isolated discussion of the theoretical debate and literature associated with the CPUSA at the expense of situating this debate within the wider context of the American Left, or the cultural production of workers themselves, this thesis consciously reads the work of professional writers who wrote in the intention of advancing the interests of workers alongside the cultural production of non-professional labour poets. In this



respect, the scope of my thesis mirrors the literary culture of the early twentieth-century American Left, in which work was valued if it was deemed to be politically useful. For example, Marcus Graham and Ralph Cheyney's 1929 collection *An Anthology of Revolutionary Poetry* mixes work of poets who are "proletarian by right of sympathy rather than accident of circumstance" (41). In Cheyney's view, the need to draw on as wide a body of politically useful poetry as possible was imperative in the context of a time in which he warned readers that "The world is tumbling about our ears.... We stand among the falling debris" (34). In Cheyney's view, poetry could play a key role in determining a positive direction for the prevailing uncertain circumstances, arguing that "Chaos gives birth to a dancing star only if we breathe into it that visible, audible fragrance of passion which is poetry" (Graham and Cheyney 34-35). Moreover, my examination of the work of Left avant-garde poets Rukeyser and Taggard in relation to ILGWU labour poetry will allow for a fuller insight into the varied, dynamic poetic strategies which were employed during the 30s, as professional and labour poets alike sought to fashion a vibrant future from the elements of political and economic chaos.

Additionally, in choosing to focus on women's poetry, I challenge the terms of the feminist scholarship of radical women's fiction written during the 1990s, in which, as mentioned earlier, women's writing was seen to constitute a "secondary zone" of literary radicalism. Instead, I present a fuller understanding of both the harmonies and dissonances that existed between women's poetry and the political and cultural movements with which writers including Rukeyser, Taggard and Tane were involved. In so doing, I respond to 30s Communist fiction-writer Meridel Le Sueur's articulation of her refusal to be excluded from the cultural sphere of a political movement with which she, like many other women, was centrally involved. In her essay "The Fetish of Being Outside" (originally printed in *New Masses*, 1935), Le Sueur argues that, "I do not feel any subtle equivocation between the individual and the new disciplined groups of the Communist Party. I do not care for the bourgeois 'individual' that I am" before asking the rhetorical question, "Why walk around the walls of Jericho merely?" (303, 301).

In combining literary analysis of Rukeyser, Taggard and Tane's poetry with discussion of the surrounding social and cultural contexts in which they wrote, my critical approach resists the temptation of maintaining the "fetish of being outside." As a trade union composed of a largely female membership, my analysis of ILGWU poetry

in relation to the union's educational culture will be also useful in broadening knowledge of the directly political uses to which poetry was put both by and in the service of women during the 30s and 40s. Ultimately, the texts examined in this thesis were chosen because of the different and exciting ways in which they manifest a politically engaged poetic praxis. I will now outline the specific ways in which this thesis contributes to a fuller understanding of the relationship between poetry and American political culture during this period.

#### **0.4 Mapping the Journey from Utopia to the Next Meal: An Outline of Structure and Content**

The first part of my thesis focuses on the poetry of Rukeyser and Taggard. During the 1930s, Rukeyser was a fellow-traveller of the American Communist Party, and Taggard was an active party member who had served as editor of the radical avant-garde periodical *Masses* during the 1920s. Both poets belonged to what Robert Shulman refers to as the "left avant-garde" within American literature of the 1930s, writers associated with the Communist Party whose work combined a clear social commitment with the use of modernist technique (6). Juxtaposing analysis of their work in the opening two chapters of my thesis, I explore the way in which both writers developed a theoretical understanding of the political efficacy of poetry, and explore how these understandings related to their poetic praxis. Insofar as the work of female poets of the Left avant-garde continues to be neglected, these opening chapters provide an important reassessment of the relation between poetic modernism and American political culture during the 1930s.

The second part of my thesis discusses the poetry of the socialist trade union, the ILGWU. The ILGWU was a large textile-workers' union based in New York City, composed of a proportionately high female membership. The ILGWU maintained a wide-ranging educational programme during the 30s and 40s, which included activities such as literary appreciation and creative writing classes. The ILGWU published and distributed poetry under the auspices of its Educational Department, in the form of poetry booklets, pamphlets and in its bi-monthly newspaper *Justice*. As John Marsh argues, the only union to cultivate poets and poems on a scale comparable with that of the ILGWU was the United Auto Workers' Union ("Auto Writers").

Existing criticism of the 30s literary Left has tended to privilege the study of those writers who sought to advance the interests of the workers, over and above any consideration of the cultural products of workers themselves. Balancing analysis of the work of professional Left writers with investigation and analysis of labour poetry, my thesis offers a fuller insight into the relationship between poetry and politics in the early twentieth century United States than has so far been available.

The first chapter of my thesis analyses the 1930s poetry of Muriel Rukeyser. In particular, I assess the way in which Rukeyser drew on ideas from the work of the 19<sup>th</sup> century physicist Josiah Willard Gibbs in order to support her understanding of poetry as a powerful political force. Her use of scientific ideas is of especial interest given that, as discussed earlier, the continued existence of poetry as a genre was perceived by influential critics such as Eastman as being under threat from the ascending cultural authority of science. I explore the significance of the fact that, at a time when high modernist writers such as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot were incorporating ideas from Einstein's general theory of relativity into their work, Rukeyser instead looked back to the work of a 19<sup>th</sup> century physicist to provide a theoretical foundation for her understanding of the radical, politically transformative potential of poetry. I begin by discussing the theoretical understanding of the relationship between the arts and sciences that Rukeyser outlines in her prose writings including her biography *Willard Gibbs* (1942) and *The Life of Poetry* (1949) - in particular, the way in which her interpretation of Gibbs' scientific thought lent support to a political understanding which resonated more widely with a tradition of pragmatic American Marxist thought. Having established the theoretical context of Rukeyser's work, I then move to an analysis of her poetry collection "The Book of the Dead" published in the collection *U.S.I* (1938). Providing close analysis of the poems "The Road," "Alloy," and "The Dam," I assess the extent to which this work articulates a revolutionary poetics which mimics the transformative physical processes accounted for by Gibbs' thought.

My second chapter examines the work of the Communist poet Genevieve Taggard. In particular, I investigate the way in which her poetry resonates with the critique of individualism articulated throughout *New Masses* in the 1930s, as expressed succinctly in critic Lewis Corey's statement that "no social revolution is possible without revolutionary consciousness" (16). Building on Taggard's statement in the *New Masses* article, "Romanticism and Communism" (1934) that "Only after the false

principle of the individual, a little universe sealed away from all the rest of life, has been ridiculed to death, can the proper function of poetry be understood,” I explore the way in which Taggard’s understanding of the relationship between poetry and consciousness resonated with the wider critical debate surrounding subjectivity which took place in *New Masses* during the 1930s (“Romanticism and Communism” 19). The debate surrounding the role of poets in shaping a new, revolutionary consciousness which was conducted among the 30s Literary Left remains a neglected area of scholarship. Yet, the potential role of poetry in fashioning a new form of consciousness conducive to both the realisation and maintenance of a revolutionary, collectivist society could contribute towards poetry’s continued *raison d’être* in the face of its declining social relevance. This point is driven home by Graham and Cheyney in their introduction to *An Anthology of Revolutionary Poetry*, where they argue that “The world will be new-born only with the spread of that consciousness which is creation, and poets are the pioneers of consciousness” (35). Having investigated and assessed the discursive context in which Taggard’s theorisation of the relation between poetry and consciousness was shaped, I conclude the chapter with close analysis of poems printed in *New Masses*, including “Life of Mind 1935” (1935), “A Middle-Aged, Middle-Class Woman...” (1936) and “The Definition of Song” (1936), by which I assess the extent to which this work realises the poetics of collective class-consciousness for which Taggard argued.

Having analysed the role of poetics and cultural critique within the Communist Left, my third chapter moves on to a discussion of the role of poetry within the organised labour movement, focussing specifically on the socialist ILGWU. The ILGWU was a pioneer of workers’ education, forging the most ambitious and wide-ranging educational and cultural programme of any labour union in the early twentieth century United States. The union-wide educational programme expanded as a response to the influx of members in the 1930s, as thousands of female African Americans, Puerto Ricans and members of other ethnic and racial groups poured into the burgeoning textile industry labour force. The ILGWU created an array of social, recreational and cultural activities in order to attract and retain these new members. ILGWU historian Gus Tyler notes that “By 1934, the union was budgeting more than a quarter million dollars a year on a variety of educational, cultural, recreational, and training programs” (197). Under the auspices of its expansive educational programme,

the ILGWU produced, distributed and encouraged the study of poetry to an extent almost unparalleled within the organised labour movement of the 1930s.

I begin this chapter by outlining the ideological and historical conditions which shaped the development of the union's uniquely extensive educational program. In particular, I discuss the roots of the union's commitment to education in the European Jewish socialist heritage of Fannia Cohn, who served as Educational Director between 1918-1935, and then as Educational Secretary from 1935-1962. Specifically, I explore Cohn's understanding of the centrality of workers' education to her vision of radical political change, and compare this understanding with that articulated by leaders within the labour movement more widely. Having established the general ideological and pedagogical context in which the union's educational programme developed, I go on to investigate the specific role which literature, and poetry in particular, played within the ILGWU in the early to mid-twentieth century. Drawing on articles from the union's newspaper *Justice* and statements issued by its educational leaders including Mark Starr and Fannia Cohn, I assess the role which poetry played in the building of the union's culture and its position in relation to the union's wider programme of educational and cultural activities.

In the fourth chapter, I go on to provide an analysis of specific poetry collections which were produced and distributed by the union's Educational Department, including *Garment Workers Speak* (1940), *Poems by and for Workers* (1941) and, more briefly, *The History of the ILWGU in Song and Poem* (1957). I open this chapter with a general description of the collections mentioned above, and a discussion of their bibliographic, material features. I describe and discuss some of these features in order to give insight into some of the political uses to which the poetry was put. Having discussed the way in which the material features of the booklets relate to their signification, I then proceed to a closer analysis of specific poems included in the collections. I take care to relate my analysis of specific poems to the wider political and interpretative context of ILGWU culture in order to assess the nature of the relationship between the union's poetic and political praxis.

The fifth and final chapter then draws on this broader analysis of the role of poetry within the ILGWU in order to focus more closely on the work of Miriam Tane, over one hundred of whose poems were published in *Justice* from 1936 until 1942.

Although Tane was a wide-ranging poet who drew on a variety of subjects and styles in her poetry, this chapter will focus specifically on her lyric poems. Drawing on my discussion of the critique of the relationship between poetics and subjectivity articulated by Taggard and other Communist writers earlier in the thesis, this chapter explores the poetics and politics of self-expression articulated by Tane. Drawing on the work of post-war Marxist thinkers including Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Emmanuel Levinas, I explore the way in which Tane's lyric poems anticipate and work through some of the ontological problems raised in their work. In particular, I read Tane's lyric poems in relation to the argument put forward by Adorno in his essay "On Lyric Poetry and Society" (1957), in which he argues that the aesthetic success of lyric poetry is determined by its capacity to mask the social and material pressures through which its expression of identity is conditioned. Adorno writes that "the greatest lyric works in our language owe their quality to the force with which the 'I' creates the illusion of nature emerging from alienation" (345). Reading poems including "Stitching Machine," "Identity," "Evacuation" and "Self Mood" with this argument in mind, I analyse the extent to which these poems resist what Adorno refers to as "the demand that the lyric world be virginal," and instead expose the nature of identity as an illusion born of as a result of ideological and material conditions (344). In so doing, I explore the rootedness of this poetry in the material conditions of its production.

## **Chapter 1: “Exchange is creation”: The Revolutionary Poetics of Muriel Rukeyser**

Discussions of the relationship between science and American modernist literature have focussed largely on the ways in which writers engaged with and appropriated the “new physics” of Einstein’s general theory of relativity and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. Particularly during the economic turmoil of the 1930s, poets such as Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore drew on scientific ideas in their work in order to re-assert the worth of poetry by way of association at a time when science (particularly physics) enjoyed enhanced cultural prestige (Steinman 155). In this chapter, I will examine the work of Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980) in order to explore the significance of her engagement with the relationship between science and poetry in the Depression-era. I will explore the significance of the fact that, instead of exploiting the contemporary cultural prestige of scientific relativism, Rukeyser looks back to the work of the nineteenth-century American scientist Josiah Willard Gibbs (1839-1903) to articulate a distinctly American left-wing poetics.

I will begin the chapter by outlining the intellectual history surrounding the second law of thermodynamics, in order to establish the foundation for an understanding of the way in which Rukeyser engages with this particular area of physics. In the second part of the chapter, I will then discuss Rukeyser’s biography *Willard Gibbs* (1942) and analyse its significance not only as a biography, but also as an important theoretical work. It is a book in which she outlines her understanding of the relationship between science, poetry, and politics. In the final part of the chapter, I will move on to an analysis of poems included in the collection “The Book of the Dead,” which comprises the first part of Rukeyser’s second published volume of poetry *U.S.I* (1938). The collection takes as its theme a devastating industrial disaster which occurred in Gauley Mountain, West Virginia between 1930 and 1931. In “The Book of the Dead,” Rukeyser critiques the discursive and material relationship between science and capitalism which set the context for the disaster. I will analyse the extent to which Rukeyser’s poetic practice in “The Book of the Dead” accords with the theoretical understanding of the relationship between science, politics and poetry outlined in both *Willard Gibbs* and the later critical work *The Life of Poetry* (1949). In so doing, I will

provide a brief comparative analysis of Rukeyser's poetry with that of the poetry of the Scottish Communist poet Hugh MacDiarmid, of whom Rukeyser spoke as her greatest influence (Kertesz 70).

### **1.1 A Brief Cultural History of the Second Law of Thermodynamics**

In order to appreciate the significance of Rukeyser's early twentieth-century engagement with the science of thermodynamics, I will begin by outlining the history of the interrelationship between this branch of physics and broader social discourses.

While it was the French engineer Sadi Carnot who gave the initial preliminary expression of the Second Law of thermodynamics in 1827, it was not until 1850 that the German physicist Rudolf Clausius offered the dominant formulation of the Second Law in a paper delivered in Berlin (Burich 471). The idea of entropy, implicit to the Second Law, was proposed by Clausius two years later. Although the Second Law has been expressed in many different ways by successive generations of physicists, the enduring cultural significance of the law lies in the notion of temporal irreversibility, or "time's arrow" which it implies. The phrase "time's arrow" was coined by the English astrophysicist Arthur Eddington in his "Gifford Lectures" of 1928 in which he outlined his understanding of the Second Law as an idea which implies the concept of a uni-directional movement through time. As the universe tends towards maximum entropy (or disorder), Eddington states that "we lose time's arrow" (78). The Second Law of thermodynamics implies a directionality of time in a way which does not apply to equations of motion in either Newtonian or quantum mechanics. The processes of thermodynamic systems are irreversible because the entropy - or measure of disorder - of an isolated system will tend to increase over time (The Cassell Dictionary of Science 386). The twentieth-century theoretical physicist Richard Feynman offers a succinct explanation of entropy:

The conservation of energy means that the total energy in the world is kept the same. But in the irregular jiggings that energy can be spread about so uniformly that, in certain circumstances, there is no way to make more go one way than the other – there is no way to control it any more. (248)

Feynman's twentieth century explanation reveals the durability of the philosophical and political anxieties latent to non-mathematical expressions of the Second Law, as the "irregular jiggings" lead to a loss of control. Clausius' description of entropy in 1852 as "the ultimate state reached in the degradation of the matter and energy of the



universe: state of inert uniformity of component elements: absence of form, pattern, hierarchy or differentiation ... the irreversible tendency of a system including the universe, toward increasing disorder and inertness” foreshadows some of the dystopian cultural interpretations to which the Second Law became subject in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Lewicki 71). As critic Michael Whitworth notes, “the second law of thermodynamics was the most powerful figuration of degeneration that the nineteenth century proposed” (60). Further, Whitworth argues that Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1895) “took heat death as a metaphor for ‘a Dusk of the Nations’, in which all suns and stars are gradually waning, and mankind with all its institutions is perishing in the midst of a dying world” (62). Frighteningly, the law of increasing entropy seemed to imply the inevitable progression of history towards what became known as the “heat-death of the universe.” According to the Second Law, as entropy increases, the energy of the cosmos becomes unavailable for work leading to what the Scottish physicist William Thomson (later Lord Kelvin) described as “a universal state of rest and death” (Thomson). Crosbie Smith has shown that, in articulating his view that “Everything in the material world was progressive,” Thomson was engaged not only in the formulation of a new science of energy, but in “the remaking of Scottish Presbyterianism ‘suitable to the wants of the age’” (*Science of Energy* 101, 19). The cultural transformation of Scotland in the nineteenth century was rapid and profound. Working in Glasgow, Thomson’s new science of energy responded to what the Reverend Norman Macleod described as “the thundering of hammers from the boilers of the great Pacific and Atlantic steamers – a music of humanity, of the giant march of civilization” (Smith *Science of Energy* 130). Smith argues that Thomson’s law of the “universal dissipation of mechanical energy” reinforced a sense of finite cosmology and of the temporal limits which would ultimately bound the march of human progress. Smith summarizes, “Presbyterian students, then, could read the doctrine as fully compatible with a traditional vision of a fallen world which was subject, like unregenerate souls, to depravity and death” (101-102). As the century progressed and the science of energy gained in recognition and prestige, this potent idea of the dissipation of energy leading to the eventual dying out of humanity took hold across the whole of Britain. The most famous literary expression of heat-death remains to be found in H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895). The protagonist of *The Time Machine* experiences the heat-death of the universe as he journeys towards the infinite reaches of time. He describes “The darkness grew apace.... All the sounds of man, the bleating of

sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives – all that was over” (Wells).

The Second Law provided scientific sustenance to *fin de siècle* anxieties of degeneration and also fed into later modernist concerns over the instability of the post-Newtonian universe (Thiher 35-36). As Gillian Beer notes, part of the cultural potency of the Second Law of thermodynamics derived from the way in which it offered scientific validation of pre-existing mythological fears of solar death. For example, Victorian writers including Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold re-interpreted the Norse Balder legend of the death of the sun God which leads to a twilight of the gods. Beer argues, “an imaginative idea – the death of the sun ... increased in intensity and range of meaning once it was accorded scientific status and was generating scientific controversy” (227). The tradition of interpreting the Second Law in dystopian terms arose from the cultural anxieties of the time in which it was discovered, rather than being inevitably implied by the science itself. Indeed, as the philosopher and economist Herbert Spencer wrote to the journalist John Tyndall in 1858

That which was new to me in your position ... was that equilibrium was death. Regarding, as I have done, equilibration as the ultimate and *highest* state of society, I had assumed it to be not only the ultimate but the highest state of the universe. And your assertion that when equilibrium was reached life must cease, staggered me. (qtd. in Duncan 104)

This quotation from Spencer highlights the range of cultural interpretations which the Second Law is able to support. In 1943, the physicist Erwin Schrodinger must begin his explication “What is Entropy” by re-asserting the nature of entropy as a “measurable physical quantity” in order to “remove entropy from the atmosphere of hazy mystery that frequently veils it” (Schrodinger). Schrodinger continues that disorder, defined in physics by the symbol *D*, is an exact statistical concept, largely arrived at through the work of Willard Gibbs and the Austrian physicist Ludwig Boltzman. Schrodinger argues, “To give an exact explanation of this quantity *D* in brief non-technical terms is well-nigh impossible” (Schrodinger). However, Schrodinger’s mid twentieth-century attempt to clarify the distinction between the science and mythology of thermodynamics serves as weak redress to the long-standing discursive intertwining of physics, mythology and social science. As Myers has argued, “Instead of an origin, we find a constant movement of commonplaces between discourses, [of physics and social science] and at each stage of this movement a claim for authority” (63). As I will go on

to show, when Rukeyser re-interprets thermodynamics in her poetry and prose of the 1930s and 1940s, she produces a deconstructive poetics that disentangles the Second Law from its long tradition of dystopian readings.

## 1.2 Entropy and Economics

An appreciation of the ideological context behind the development of thermodynamics and its relationship to economics is important to an understanding of how Rukeyser later re-interprets the Second Law of thermodynamics in support of her left-wing poetics. The development of the science of thermodynamics was accelerated by the industrial revolution. The theorisation of the nature of heat grew out of practical necessity, as Scottish scientists and engineers including Thomson and William Rankine grappled with the problem of making steam engines as efficient as was physically possible. Thomson's association of universal equilibration with death belies the industrial anxieties which were the driving force behind the development of the science of thermodynamics in Victorian Britain. From its inception, therefore, the Second Law of thermodynamics was bound together with economic ideas of productivity and labour. As Smith notes, Thomson remarked in correspondence with the English physicist George Stokes that with regard to the operation of heat engines, "it may I believe be demonstrated that work is lost to man irrecoverably" (*Energy and Empire* 497). Smith shows that Kelvin "generalized from the economical loss of energy in machines to cosmological dissipation in the economy of nature" (498). In 1851, Kelvin argued that "when heat is diffused by conduction there is an economical loss as regards its value as a source of mechanical effect" (qtd. in Smith *Energy and Empire* 498). For Kelvin, entropy is associated with the loss of available work. The interpretation of the Second Law in terms of productivity and efficiency is strongly indebted to the Presbyterian tradition in which this science was first fully articulated. Smith explains that the Presbyterian economy relies on the concept of "gift-giving ... which has to be understood in terms of a downwards-directed structure" (*Science of Energy* 22). As the available energy gifted to mankind by God wound down to nothing, it was the duty of society to maximise the utility of this great gift while it was still available. Smith argues, "It was an economy which sought to maximise the virtues of useful work and minimize the vices of idleness and waste" (22). Thomson's theorisation of the science of energy articulated in explicit terms the morality governing the growth of industrial capitalism. Thomson argued

Although no destruction of energy can take place in the material world without an act of power possessed only by the supreme ruler, yet transformations take place which remove irrecoverably from the control of man sources of power which, if the opportunity of turning them to his own account had been made use of, might have been rendered available. (qtd. in Smith *Science of Energy* 110)

Within the terms of the Presbyterian physics of industrial northern Britain, the efficient exploitation of resources became a moral duty as Thomson's term "dissipation carried connotations of moral and financial waste" (Smith *Science of Energy* 124). As the nineteenth century progressed, the science of energy assumed increased practical significance for the successful functioning of the British Empire. The practical application of the science, particularly in the laying of under-sea telegraph cables, necessitated the design of an absolute system of measurements of electrical properties. The Scottish theoretical physicist James Clerk Maxwell argued that "The man of business requires these standards for the sake of justice, the man of science requires them for the sake of truth" (qtd. in Smith *Science of Energy* 268). The standardisation of the scientific units involved in the physics of energy made possible the successful operations of imperial trade and, as Smith contends, "represented an explicit embodiment of energy physics in space: the cultural and physical spaces of imperial power" (*Science of Energy* 270). As I will go on to argue, Rukeyser's twentieth-century re-engagement with the Second Law of thermodynamics involves a critique of the spatial dimension of the industrial-capitalism which this branch of science enabled.

The critic Greg Myers has shown that scientists working in the newly defined discipline of physics adapted scientific ideas to more familiar and commonly held beliefs about the nature of society in order to popularize their work and make it accessible to a general audience. In so doing, the Edinburgh physicist Balfour Stewart "makes the connection between science and society explicit" (Myers 49). As Myers argues, Stewart's use of social metaphor in his expositions of science tended to explain the workings of capitalism as much as elucidate the laws of energy. Explaining the First Law of thermodynamics (the law of the conservation of energy) Stewart argues,

The world of mechanism is not a manufactory, in which energy is created, but rather a mart, into which we may bring energy of one kind and change or barter it for an equivalent of one kind, that suits us better – but if we come with nothing in our hand, with nothing we shall most assuredly return. (qtd. in Myers 54)

Clearly, Stewart perceives a direct analogy between physics and economics, naturalizing capitalism as an ideology linked to the laws of energy governing the cosmos. Myers notes that the “the economic system applies to the physical situation only if one views the exchanges in physics as a capitalist” because the analogy relies upon assumptions of the nature of economic value as an immutable quantity within a given society (57). However, as with Lord Kelvin, the law of increasing entropy threatens the operation of nineteenth century industrial capitalism, as the dissipation of energy leads to a loss of available work. Stewart explains “the tendency of heat is towards equalization; heat is *par excellence* the communist of our universe, and it will no doubt ultimately bring the present system to an end” (qtd. in Myers 57). The discursive inter-relationship between temporal and economic systems enacted by the concept of entropy has had enduring significance within economic theory. Regenia Gagnier highlights the centrality of time to modern economic theory, quoting the economist Lionel Robbins’ description in his influential *Essay on the Nature and Significance of Economic Science* (1935) that “Life is short. Nature is niggardly ... The disposition of [economic man’s] time and his resources has a relationship to his system of wants. It has an economic aspect” (qtd. in Gagnier, 300). Although no longer overtly articulated, Thomson’s Presbyterian morality persists in Robbins’s twentieth-century statement. The finite nature of time creates an imperative to utilise resources to maximum efficiency within the time-scale which nature permits. For a nineteenth-century scientist such as Stewart, whose professional interests were conditioned by the needs of industry and empire, the end of capitalism and the death of the universe become conflated in a powerful dystopian prophecy. However, Rukeyser indirectly quotes Stewart’s assertion that “heat is *par excellence* the communist of our universe” when lauding the role of Gibbs in the modern development of thermodynamics. Discussing Gibbs’ receipt of the Rumford Medal by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1881, she quotes at length the address given by the scientist Joseph Lovering on the occasion of the award’s presentation. During this speech, Lovering refers to “the writer in the *London Spectator* [Stewart’s] argument that ‘heat is the communist of the universe’” (qtd. in Rukeyser, *Willard Gibbs* 266). In the context of celebrating the place of Gibbs in the historical development of thermodynamics, Rukeyser’s indirect quotation of Stewart’s equation of economic and physical systems assumes a newly positive significance. Re-iterating the analogy yet transplanting it from its original context, Stewart’s argument becomes a statement of the latent

progressivism of the laws of energy, working as they do to support social transformation leading toward a state of economic equality conceived in terms of physical equilibrium.

Furthermore, Gibbs' interpretation of physical phenomena using statistical probabilities had important theoretical implications for physics. Gibbs' work was particularly significant in making explicit the seemingly paradoxical nature of the Second Law of thermodynamics as a law which married together ideas of temporal determinism and physical chaos. The irreversibility of physical processes is dependent on the fact that, at the molecular level, physical processes are determined by random events. Keith R. Burich notes that the concept of "irreversibility raised the paradoxical possibility that processes such as entropy that appeared to be mechanically determined were, at bottom, functions of random events" (474). As Rukeyser noted, Gibbs was the first to apply statistical mathematics to the study of systems in equilibria and it "was Gibbs, too, who would give the science its name: *Statistical Mechanics*" (Willard Gibbs 335).

Discussing the evolution of thermodynamics, the physicist E. T. Jaynes notes that Gibbs extended the "practical application [of the Second Law] to serve the stronger purpose of quantitative prediction; to fill the logical void left by the great incompleteness of thermodynamic data" (6). The notion that probabilities could be applied to the interpretation of physical events introduced the principle that a deterministic scientific materialism has its limits. Jaynes argues, "at this point, thermodynamics takes on a fundamentally new character (6). Instead of questioning 'What do the laws of physics require the system to do'... Gibbs asked a more modest question 'What is the best guess we can make, from the partial information that we have?'" (Jaynes 6). Myers addresses the philosophical implications of this methodological shift in the science of thermodynamics, arguing that "statistical uncertainty does not undermine natural law; it leaves a loophole for will" (48). In this respect, the understanding of entropy made available by Gibbs' work provides an uneasy agreement between determinism, chance, and free will. Having laid the foundations for an understanding of Gibbs' role in the development of the intellectual history of thermodynamics, I will now move on to discuss the significance of Gibbs to Rukeyser's work.

### 1.3 “Mathematics is a language”: *Willard Gibbs* as Theoretical Treatise

The reasons why Muriel Rukeyser chose to write a full-length biography of the physicist Josiah Willard Gibbs are not immediately apparent. Epitomising the stereotype of the isolated genius, the reticent figure of Gibbs was a difficult subject for a biography. Indeed, Rukeyser’s book was the first full-length account of the man who has been referred to as “the father of physical chemistry” (Dick 99). Contemporary reviewers of *Willard Gibbs* commented on the enormity of the challenge which Rukeyser faced when she embarked on this ground-breaking biographical endeavour. Writing in *The Pacific Historical Review*, Hugh G. Dick noted that Rukeyser faced “almost insuperable difficulties in presenting him (Gibbs) to a general audience” (99). Furthermore, Gibbs’ “personal life was colorless,” he was “an extraordinarily reticent man” who “left almost no materials to illuminate his private life” (Dick 99).

Lacking substantive biographical material, Gibbs’ apparent isolation and obscurity itself becomes a chief object of Rukeyser’s concern. In her “Introduction: On Presumption,” Rukeyser argues that her task as a biographer is not simply to draw attention to the life of an otherwise forgotten genius, but to render visible the politics behind American national memory. Rukeyser laments that America too often carelessly ignores the “sources of energy” which have contributed to its greatness, arguing that “America is full of the anonymity of such greatness” (*Willard Gibbs* 5). She continues

This carelessness is complicated and specialized. It is a main symptom of the disease of our schools, which let the *kinds* of knowledge fall away from each other, and waste knowledge, and time, and people. All our training plays into this; our arts do; and our government. It is a disease of organization, it makes more waste and war. (12)

Here, the Presbyterian morality underlying nineteenth century interpretations of thermodynamics becomes transformed into a critique of the dissipation and waste present in American economies of knowledge. In *Willard Gibbs*, Rukeyser offers an exposition of Gibbs’ life and ideas, making available to her readers the great “energy” of the scientist’s work. In attempting to undermine the systems of knowledge which had led to Gibbs “vanishing as if he had been a snowman living in snow,” Rukeyser’s biography becomes a vast attempt to relate Gibbs’ life and work to American cultural history (13). In his review, Dick complained about the dizzying “centrifugal” nature of the work, which “begins with Gibbs at the centre and then whirls out to the forces of the

age as she sees them” (99). Approaching *Willard Gibbs* at the suggestion of the book’s subtitle as “A superb biography of one of America’s greatest scientists,” it is easy to share Dick’s frustration that this lengthy book is only sparsely populated with biographical information, with chapter III, “A New Haven Childhood,” containing only “two paragraphs and one sentence about Gibbs himself” (Dick 100). It is impossible to read *Willard Gibbs* as a biography, in any traditional sense of the genre.

What, then, is *Willard Gibbs*? Establishing Gibbs as a creative genius whose scientific work Rukeyser regards as a “source” of America’s cultural greatness, *Willard Gibbs* can instead be regarded as an exposition of Rukeyser’s theory that scientists and poets are both “worker(s) in pure imagination ... those working closest to the spirit in any field” (*Willard Gibbs* 4). As yet, criticism of Rukeyser’s work has overlooked the significance of *Willard Gibbs* as a study in which she formulates her theoretical understanding of the relations between science and poetry. Meg Schoerke has emphasised the significance of Rukeyser’s later book *The Life of Poetry* (1949) as a text which “traces the interconnections between these systems [poetry, individual poets and readers] and suggests that a change of phase, or energy exchange, in one system, such as a poem, generates transformation in the other systems” (Schoerke 29). Indeed, the central idea which Rukeyser puts forward in *The Life of Poetry* is that “Exchange is creation. In poetry, the exchange is one of energy” (qtd. in Levi 165). This idea had a lengthy and complicated gestation in the poet’s earlier, and relatively neglected, scientific biography.

In *Willard Gibbs*, Rukeyser outlines her understanding that scientists and poets are “sources of power” (*Willard Gibbs* 2) whose imaginations are able to reveal the systems of “energy” which govern social relations. In Rukeyser’s terms, science and poetry are linked as modes of thought which both reveal and release imaginative energy. In the chapter of *Willard Gibbs* entitled “On Presumption,” she argues that “In the imaginations which tapped that energy (of the past and future), in the energy itself and its release, we see our power” (2). Ultimately, for Rukeyser, “the root of such power, of such invention, is in the imaginative lives of certain men and women. (...) Willard Gibbs is such a source of power” (3). Establishing the scientist as one of “the four great men of his time in this country – Lincoln, Melville, Whitman, Gibbs,” Rukeyser emphasizes the common enterprise of science and literature “to discover, to make known, to find a language for discovery” (2, 5). A product of a poet’s imagination, the scientific biography-cum-cultural history *Willard Gibbs* becomes an instantiation of



Rukeyser's own theory that science and poetry are linked as sources of "energy" through which the operations of cultural and political power are revealed. As Clive Bush argues, *Willard Gibbs* shows "a poet confronting achievement in the history of science and hence automatically challenging, in the very attempt, the assumption that these fields are mutually exclusive" (3). Moreover, Bush points out that behind Rukeyser's refusal to respect traditional subject boundaries in her work lies "a strong political conviction that such categories are allied to control systems which direct thought and behaviour in favour of the *status quo*" (1). In writing scientific biography as cultural history, in *Willard Gibbs* Rukeyser deliberately transgresses disciplinary and generic boundaries, refusing to delimit knowledge in the terms of the kind of political factionalism against which the People's Olympiad of 1936 was one instance of protest.

For the most part, however, *Willard Gibbs* was overlooked by feminist scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Louise Kertesz, in their recovery of Rukeyser's work. Bush's 1973 article on *Willard Gibbs* has received little attention. Contemporaneous reviewers, on the other hand, identified and critiqued the nature of *Willard Gibbs* as a poetic manifesto. Writing in *The American Historical Review*, Ralph H. Gabriel opines that Rukeyser's theoretical concern to show that "because both the poet and the theoretical scientist contribute to civilization through creative imagination, there is a kinship between them" detracts from the book's ostensibly biographical project (750).

Appreciating *Willard Gibbs* as a book in which the poet articulates her theoretical position allows us to understand more fully the significance of Rukeyser's text as a considered intervention into the heated contemporary critical debate about the changing relation between science and the arts. The difficult economic circumstances of the Depression exacerbated the challenge faced by the arts to retain relevance in the face of the growing cultural authority of science in the early decades of the twentieth century. This challenge assumed particular importance within the literary left, as writers, critics and intellectuals debated the role of culture in political change. As a writer working within the Left avant-garde, Rukeyser's extensive discussion of the relation between science and the arts in *Willard Gibbs* can be considered in the broader context of contemporary intellectual debates about the role of science and the arts in American culture and politics. Discussion of the American Left's engagement with the challenges posed by science in the early twentieth century has thus far been isolated from the more extensive critical attention focussed on modernist writers such as Ezra Pound, T S Eliot and Virginia Woolf's engagement with scientific ideas. Lisa Steinman

has discussed the problematic way in which modernist writers in the United States responded to the increased cultural authority of science relative to the arts. Steinman argues that an attempt to identify poetry with technology

appeared to offer American poets a way of including the real world in their art and of defending their poetry in a culture that respected most the work of engineers or industrial designers, in short, the work of practical men. At the same time, the poets hoped to show European modernists that America's writers could be as inventive as its engineers. (5)

As Steinman suggests, modernist poets' engagement with science centred on the issue of its purpose in an age driven by scientific advance. For example, Williams understood Einstein's theory of General Relativity as a profound scientific advance that had important consequences for the future of poetry. In his 1948 lecture "The Poem as a Field of Action," Williams asks, "How can we accept Einstein's theory of relativity, affecting our very conception of the heavens about us of which poets write so much, without incorporating its essential fact – the relativity of measurements – into our own category of activity: the poem" (283). Here, Williams makes clear his understanding that General Relativity has direct consequences for poetic metre. However, as Steinman notes, Williams was ambivalent in his engagement with modern physics, wavering between "claiming Einstein for poetry, claiming poetry's superiority to science, and, with some justice, casting doubt on the reasons for Einstein's status as a celebrity" (102-103).

Steinman's *Made in America – Science, Technology, and American Poets* (1987) has provided a valuable account of the way in which ideas from modern physics were incorporated into the work of modernist poets including Pound, Williams and Moore. However, writers and critics on the Left responded to the same myriad of pressures and challenges faced by the broader intellectual community.

A key figure in the debate regarding the relationship between science and literature in the Depression era was the radical philosopher, critic, and sometime poet, Max Eastman. Max Eastman was an influential figure on the Left; "A product of the Progressive generation who never entertained its faith in liberal reform, Eastman had been chief editor and guiding light of the old *Masses*" (Pells 126). Eastman's *The Literary Mind: Its Place in an Age of Science* (1931) addressed directly the prevalent feeling that the authority of literature was being undermined by "the advance of

technical and specialized understanding” (Eastman 26). Eastman belonged to a group of American Marxists including Robert Lynd who “wanted somehow to “Americanize” Marx” by developing a pragmatic Marxism which stressed “the impact of human consciousness and will in transforming institutions” (Pells 126-127). Eastman attacked the “Hegelian” aspect of Marxism, dismissing dialectical materialism as “fatalistic” (Pells 128). In so doing, he stressed the importance of the role of the sciences in shaping the course of human history toward revolution.

Eastman’s text responds directly to “this change in the relative estimation of the scientist and the man of letters” which he regards as “one of the most important changes that has ever occurred anywhere” (Eastman 11). Not only Eastman, but a range of lesser known commentators including Ralph Crum and Scott Buchanan (both of whom Rukeyser cites in the bibliography to *Willard Gibbs*) respond to the perceived crisis in literature caused by the advance of science. For example, the influential literary critic I. A. Richards argued that poetry was fundamentally under threat from science. In *Science and Poetry* (1926), Richards quotes Thomas Love Peacock’s view that “A poet in our times is a semi-barbarian in a civilized community” as evidence of the “‘representative modern view’ that ‘the future of poetry is *nil*’” (Richards 7). Although a poet himself, Eastman launches a scathing attack on the “folly” of attempting to shield literature against the onslaught of scientific knowledge. Eastman reserved some of his most vitriolic attack for the modernists as participants in what he referred to as “the Cult of Unintelligibility,” arguing that “in the age of science, an obscurity impenetrable by acid, lens or scalpel is the sole refuge of the literary scholar” (57, 49). Eastman’s attack on modernist experimentation was driven by his belief that its unscientific, narcissistic tendencies impeded the awakening and movement of social forces. He argues, for example, that “Joyce’s most original contribution to English literature has been to lock up one of its most brilliant geniuses inside his own vest” while asserting that “an association between scientific progress and the revolt of the masses is indubitable” (66, 284). As Pells argues, in emphasising the role of science in his pragmatic conception of Marxism, Eastman’s “technocratic celebration of the engineer created a cult of leadership at odds with communist ideals, separating the “scientists” of the revolution from the working-class and turning a dictatorship *of* the proletariat into a dictatorship *over* the proletariat” (430).

In contrast, Rukeyser stressed the affinities between science and poetry as acts of creative imagination which have an impact on the surrounding world. Elaborating on this idea in *Willard Gibbs*, she argues

The poets and scientists, those who have given themselves most closely to the creation and description of systems, speak to the ripeness of their age; live conscious that their own nature is to be translated into the terms of the systems of which they speak.... The world of the poet, however, is the scientist's world. Their claim on systems is the same claim. Their writings anticipate each other; welcome each other; indeed embrace. As Lucretius answered Epicurus, Gibbs answers Whitman, however unconsciously and from a distant effort. (11)

Rukeyser stresses the nature of both poetry and science as acts of translation, which transform "systems" of nature into the terms available in human discourse. In this regard, her thought comes close to a Descriptionist understanding of science. Descriptionism was a philosophy of science developed in the late nineteenth century by a range of figures including most prominently the physicist Ernst Mach and the mathematician Karl Pearson. Whitworth explains, "Descriptionism provided a scientific shorthand for the idea that representations of reality were selective shorthands, artificial constructs aiming to preserve mental energy" (110). As Whitworth argues, modernist writers such as Woolf drew on Descriptionism as a philosophy which, in its reliance on the senses, supported a position of radical individualism and thereby proved antagonistic to both conservatives and Marxists. Whitworth notes the British politician Herbert Samuel's remark that "a world in which cause and effect are merely mental constructs is a world in which one's political actions have been rendered ineffective" (88).

While Rukeyser does draw on a Descriptionist view of science, she makes explicit the economic rationale behind this philosophy. In her chapter entitled "Mathematics *Is* a Language" after a quotation from Gibbs, she discusses a review of two algebra textbooks which she claims that he had read. Without citing any evidence to support her claim, Rukeyser argues that there was "one sentence in this review that remained with Willard Gibbs" (*Willard Gibbs* 273). Singling out this quotation for special attention, she clearly endorses the reviewer's opinion that "the human mind has never invented a labor-saving device equal to algebra" (273). She continues:

Labor-saving devices! They were the rule of life, as America entered the Gilded Age. Charles Francis Adams, who was just becoming President of the Union Pacific, might see the whole railway system as a labor-saving device, or a wide exhibit of labor-saving devices, sowing cities from the Atlantic to California. (273-274)

Here, Rukeyser makes explicit the parallel between systems of thought and economies of labour. Pells argues that underlying the Descriptionist philosophy was “the thermodynamic and Darwinistic notion that any animal has a limited quantity of energy available to it” and so, as Pearson suggested, the human mind condenses a wide range of experiences into scientific laws or mathematical formulae to reduce the labour involved in existing mental operations. In turn, this economizing of thought makes possible the growth of the capitalist system, with its efficient transportation networks and urban centres. While adopting a relativistic view of science, Rukeyser encourages her readers to reflect on the nature of the relationship between systems of thought and labour, rendering visible the capitalist ethos behind processes of scientific rationalisation.

Heralded as a creative genius, Rukeyser argues that Gibbs’ major contribution to science was to introduce this idea of self-reflexivity into scientific understanding. His most renowned paper, “On the Equilibrium of Heterogeneous Substances” enabled an understanding of the relations between distinct systems, allowing for a more reflexive understanding of the nature of the physical world. Rukeyser argues that “Over a vast field Gibbs made it possible to know what results would follow given sets of conditions; only by such knowledge is man enabled to manage natural forces. The key words are ‘possible to know’. They are a key that belongs to art, science, philosophy, and religion” (*Willard Gibbs* 366). Although participating in the Descriptionist enterprise of “paring down language to economize thought,” Gibbs’ relational understanding brought into view the larger forces at play in natural history (Rukeyser, *Willard Gibbs* 368). Poetically, Rukeyser argues that Gibbs “reached past order while the barriers faded; as he became more real, they could be clearly seen, phantom, untrue ... he had created the creative” (368).

Linking Gibbs with Melville and Whitman, Rukeyser suggests that creative intelligences such as these reveal and influence the relations governing the meta-narrative of national history. For Rukeyser, Gibbs was at once “a deep and powerful expression of his time,” yet also a man who, alongside Melville and Whitman, “had to

do with the expression of the possible” (*Willard Gibbs* 363). Including the American philosopher Scott Buchanan’s *Poetry and Mathematics* (1929) in the reading list appended to *Willard Gibbs*, Rukeyser’s conception of the creative affinity between science and poetry is indebted to Buchanan’s earlier theorising of the essential similarity between these fields. Buchanan argues, “Science is an allegory that asserts that the relations between the parts of reality are similar to the relations between the terms of discourse. The natural universe is the things and their relations that enter into the allegories of science” (97). For Buchanan, poetry offers “insight into the symbolic relation” while simultaneously enacting a mechanical process in which emotion is “recollected in intense tranquillity and released under properly controlled atmospheric conditions” (100, 40). Similarly for Rukeyser, poetry expresses the relations between systems while manifesting a process of “giving and taking,” of enacting an exchange of “energy” which powers creative articulations, expressions of the possible (qtd. in Levi 165). It is important to note that rather than drawing on developments in modern physics, Rukeyser chose to look back to the work of an obscure 19<sup>th</sup> century physicist in developing her understanding of the relationship between science, poetry, and revolutionary political praxis.

In this context, the theory of poetry which Rukeyser develops through the work of Gibbs and articulates in *Willard Gibbs* resonates with a tradition of Marxist thought in America, in which, as Pells argues, theorists such as Eastman, Lynd and Sidney Hook attempted to articulate a revolutionary philosophy which “left considerable room for human innovation and experiment” (133). Unlike Eastman, who rejected the concept of dialectical materialism “in order to maximise the pragmatic and activist strains of Marx,” Hook “believed that dialectical materialism already gave men sufficient freedom to change their lives” (Pells 133). Gibbs’ application of statistical probabilities to the study of thermodynamic systems mirrors Hook’s political understanding in which, as Pells argues, “there were no ‘musts’ in history, only ‘conditioned probabilities’” (134). Through his debates with Eastman in the pages of the *Modern Quarterly* during the early thirties, Hook “recast Marxism in the vernacular of the United States,” developing a pragmatic Marxism which interpreted dialectical materialism as a model of understanding the interrelationship between man’s subjective consciousness and the broader movements of history (Denning 426). Arriving at an analogous social understanding through an alternative discursive path, in *Willard Gibbs* Rukeyser develops, circuitously, a similarly pragmatic philosophical position which maintains a

role for human activity within the external movements of human history. Rukeyser stresses the role of the creative imagination (present in the arts and sciences) in both influencing and responding to the outside world. In so doing, she outlines a pragmatic role for the arts in directing the course of American history, while at the same time providing a medium in which to identify and critique the broader socio-political relations which govern the conditions in which the “remorseless march of time” unfolds (*Willard Gibbs* 373).

#### **1.4 The Political Mechanics of “The Book of the Dead”**

Having established the importance of *Willard Gibbs* as a key text in which Rukeyser outlines her understanding of the creative affinity between science and poetry, I will now move on to a discussion of her collection of poetry titled “The Book of the Dead,” published in the collection *U.S.I* (1938), in order to explore the ways in which Rukeyser’s scientific understanding informs her poetics. If, as Rukeyser argues in *The Life of Poetry*, poetry enacts a transference of energy, manifesting the political “capacity to produce change in existing conditions” to what extent do these poems embody this capacity? (qtd. in Levi 165) Judging “The Book of the Dead” by the standards which Rukeyser outlines in both *Willard Gibbs* and *The Life of Poetry*, I will explore the extent to which these poems not only make possible a recognition of “the energies that are transferred between people when a poem is given and taken,” but also discuss the degree to which Rukeyser’s dynamic poetics are linked to processes of political change (qtd. in Levi 164). Following Walter Kalaidjian’s argument that “we need to resist the familiar critical tendency that simply dismisses proletarian poetry *tout court* as a dogmatic expression of party doctrine” and instead “consider how depression-era poetry actually functioned as a potent catalyst for changing views of self and society,” I will take seriously the Marxist view of history which, as I will show, Rukeyser develops throughout the collection, yet which, as Tim Dayton argues, can still often seem “particularly unattractive to most critics, except in the most limited and provisional ways” (Kalaidjian 56, Dayton 132). While the collection as a whole provides both an exploration and indictment of the circumstances surrounding the Gauley Bridge mining disaster of 1930-1931, I focus on “Alloy,” “Power” and “The Dam” in particular as pivotal poems in which Rukeyser attempts to generate discursive and political change amidst her critique of an industrial tragedy.

The collection of poems entitled “The Book of the Dead” forms the bulk of Rukeyser’s second volume of poetry, *U.S. I* (1938). This collection takes as its theme the industrial disaster which occurred in Gauley Mountain, Fayette County, West Virginia in 1930-1931. A three mile long tunnel was being constructed beneath Gauley Mountain, which was primarily intended to divert water from the New River to a hydroelectric power station. However, during the construction work it was discovered that the tunnel contained large deposits of silica, a compound essential to the steel industry and also to the manufacture of glass. The ambitious and costly (the investment totalled approximately \$9,000,000) hydroelectric project, overseen by the Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation, was also a lucrative mining operation (Lucas and Paxton). Many of the workers employed on the project were migrants from other states, with African American labourers constituting a large proportion of the workforce (Lucas and Paxton). As Dayton notes, the disorganised nature of the labour force “combined with the desire of Union Carbide and its associates for speed and economy in the construction of the tunnel to produce the greatest industrial disaster in the history of the United States” (17).

In an effort to hasten the mining process, the company employed “dry” rather than the safer practice of “wet” drilling, in which the silica dust raised by mining is washed away by water (Kertesz 100). Louise Kertesz comments that, “The contractors, with thirty years’ experience, knew the danger of dry drilling, yet they provided no safety devices for the men” (100). Breathed into the lungs, silica dust forms fibrous growths which eventually choke the supply of oxygen to the body. The fatal effects of the economic mining practices and poor working conditions were soon felt. Although no precise records of the fatalities were kept, with workers buried anonymously *en masse*, Cherniack’s conservative estimate is that the dead totalled 764 workers by the end of the 1930s (100). While the dead remained largely anonymous, the enormity of the disaster ensured a nationwide media response. Although construction work had begun in 1930, Dayton notes the delayed reaction of the national press in reporting the incident, commenting that “lawsuits had been filed on behalf of stricken workers for more than two years before *New Masses* ran several pieces in 1935 describing the man-made disaster” (20). However, by the late thirties the tragedy had come to the attention of the leading mainstream media, with *Time* and *Newsweek* both running articles during the 1936 hearings before a subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Labor (Lucas and Paxton). A profound tragedy, America’s worst



industrial disaster seemed to embody a surfeit of despair which exceeded the expressive bounds of the folk ballads, transcripts of legal hearings, stock reports and newspaper articles through which the event was publicised. Rukeyser makes use of each of these forms in attempting to forge a transformative poetry which transcends the capacities of each of these forms taken in isolation, adhering to Willard Gibbs' maxim that "truth is an accord that actually makes the whole 'simpler than its parts'" (qtd. in Levi 164).

The collection "The Book of the Dead" begins on "The Road." As Kalaidjian has noted, the title, *U.S. 1* alludes to the guide to the highway U.S.1 produced as part of the American Guide Series of the Federal Writers' Project (71). In charting the landscape of a major industrial disaster, Rukeyser undercuts the state-authored text of scenic driving routes, picnic areas and tourist spots, instead exposing a geo-political landscape characterized by exploitation and hardship. "The Road" begins, "These are roads to take when you think of your country" ("The Road"). This initial line seems to grant the reader a degree of control over the movement of the poem, in that the reader is invited to "take" the roads, rather than simply follow them. In these opening stanzas of the collection, Rukeyser foregrounds her deployment of "the road" as a trope linking geographical to narrative movement:

These are roads to take when you think of your country  
and interested bring down the maps again,  
phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend,

reading the papers with morning inquiry.  
Or when you sit at the wheel and your small light  
Chooses gas gauge and clock; and the headlights

Indicate future of road, your wish pursuing  
past the junction, the fork, the suburban station,  
well-travelled six-lane highway planned for safety. ("The Road")

The reader's progress along the road is implicitly connected with the modes of representation which condition the road's negotiation, as the reader is invited to "bring down the maps" and read "the papers with morning inquiry." As discussed previously, Rukeyser felt that Gibbs' scientific paper, "The Equilibrium of Heterogeneous Substances" made possible new readings of national identity, releasing a new age. In these opening stanzas of "The Road," Rukeyser invites us to reflect on the function of

different modes of interpretation in conditioning the terms of both narrative and physical movement.

While the reader has actively taken the road, progress is conditioned by maps, statistics, friendly advice, the newspapers, and, importantly, by the technology of the car. It is only after “headlights/ indicate future of road” that the reader is able to follow the direction of his or her own will, “your wish pursuing past the junction.” The level of narrative control seemingly established in the opening line is shortly after undercut by the discourses which intervene in the course of “The Road” and the poem’s path. According to Kertesz, when asked which “contemporary poet had the most influence on her vision of possibility” Rukeyser answered “[Hugh] MacDiarmid” (70). Rukeyser’s concern to foreground the role of technologies of perception in mediating the course of history is a concern shared by the contemporary Communist and Scottish nationalist poet MacDiarmid. Throughout his poetry, MacDiarmid employs the ocean as a trope for history. For both MacDiarmid and Rukeyser, employing the ocean and the road respectively as metaphors for human history serves as a vivid imaginative and political device which offers their readers tangible images of history as a material force, yet which also self-consciously foregrounds the role of narrative interpretation in mediating the course of historical progress. MacDiarmid’s poem “Third Hymn to Lenin,” dedicated to Rukeyser, employs the trope of the ocean as history. Yet, in “Third Hymn to Lenin,” MacDiarmid exposes the problematic nature of his choice of metaphor. The ocean is temperamental, and difficult to navigate. For MacDiarmid, seamen (who occupy the same relation to the ocean as readers do to the poem) master the ocean only at a superficial level, learning to read a “note in the wind, an allusion over the salt-junk” while being able to grasp only a “sense of concealed but powerful meanings sunk/ In hints that almost pass too quick to seize” (“Third Hymn to Lenin”). In contrast to the seamen, MacDiarmid praises Lenin as a “proletarian seer” who “could say”:

This wave will recede, this advance, knew every wave  
By name, and foresaw its inevitable way  
And the final disposition of the whirling whole;  
So identified at every point with the historic flow  
That, even as you pronounced, so it occurred? (“Third Hymn to Lenin”)

Here, MacDiarmid attributes Lenin’s position as a political visionary to his unique interpretative capacity, his ability to “grasp, once for all, all sides as in a vise.” In

contrast to the seamen, for whom the inevitable movement of the tides is obscured by the caprice of each individual wave, Lenin is an expert navigator, whose reading abilities are such that he is able to predict the events of the historical narrative at the same time as he engages in the process of its interpretation.

The opening stanzas of Rukeyser's "The Road" grant the reader a similar level of narrative control, with the frequent use of the possessive second-person pronoun "your," as in "your wish" and "your tall central-city's influence" creating the impression that the landscape negotiated by the poem is subject to the reader's concern. However, the road assumes greater directional control as the poem progresses. A shift occurs in the opening line of the fifth stanza, "These roads will take you into your own country" which echoes yet subtly contrasts with the poem's initial line, "These are roads to take when you think of your country." Use of the second person pronoun subsides after the fifth stanza, as the road carries the reader through the West Virginia landscape:

These roads will take you into your own country.

Select the mountains, follow rivers back,  
travel the passes. Touch West Virginia where

the Midland Trail leaves the Virginia furnace,  
iron Clifton Forge, Covington iron, goes down  
into the wealthy valley, resorts, the chalk hotel. ("The Road")

The undulating form of the three line stanzas, together with the use of enjambment and the directional indicator "down" (used twice, in lines seventeen and thirty-five) imbue the poem's later movements with a teleological direction which plays off against the readerly control of the opening section. The road gains momentum as it progresses, gathering energy through the effects of friction between the reader's subjectivity and the road's blind, pre-determined descent across both the blank page and the West Virginian landscape. Having established this momentum, Rukeyser uses the transferred epithets of "wealthy valley" and "chalk hotel" to subtly draw attention to the ways in which our understanding of this landscape is implicitly mediated by the capitalist discourse which governs the conditions of its development.

Towards the end of "The Road," Rukeyser presents a direct critique of realism as an aesthetic practice which lays claim to an objective social reality. The tenth stanza reads:

Now the photographer unpacks camera and case,  
 Surveying the deep country, follows discovery  
 Viewing on groundglass an inverted image. ("The Road")

Kalaidjian has identified that the camera obscura featured here is an allusion to that featured by Marx in *The German Ideology* as "an explanatory metaphor in his critique of false consciousness" (73). Marx employs the camera obscura as a figurative representation of the function of ideology within capitalist society, inverting and so obscuring the "real conditions of material production" (73).

By situating the photographer and his camera within the poem, Rukeyser shows that this Marxist understanding of the inverted relations of material production is inevitably positioned within the terms of the discourses which it seeks to critique. The reference to "groundglass" in line thirty is pertinent with respect to Rukeyser's concern to highlight the relation of art to the ideological conditions of its production. Glass, as the medium by which we come to recognise the distorted relations of capitalist ideology is a product of this ideology, a product whose development had devastating effects for the Gauley Bridge mine workers. While debate raged among Left artists and literati in the thirties and forties as to the potential role of modernist abstraction in furthering the political aims of proletarian art, Rukeyser's self-reflective view of the photographer figure within her poem pre-empts the critique made by artists such as Joseph LeBoit who, in adhering to the naturalist dictates of Social Realism, felt that modernist experimentation or abstraction in art was achieved at the expense of acknowledging the position of such art within the political struggle. Indeed, Rukeyser's reflective glance at the photographer within "The Road" is an image which stands in direct contradistinction to that of LeBoit's print ironically entitled "Tranquility" (1940) in which a painter, protected by a gas mask, sits at work on an abstract canvas while through the window of his studio we see warplanes flying over ruined buildings. Images such as these portrayed a dichotomy between politically engaged and experimental art which Rukeyser undercuts through her experimental use of documentary technique.

In this respect, Rukeyser engages with a "documentary aesthetic" which, as Michael Denning argues, was "a central modernist innovation ...the crucial aesthetic forms of the cultural front were not simple representationalism" (118). Rukeyser works in common with contemporary writers who employed "documentary" technique in

order to draw attention to the ways in which reality is inherently mediated by the ideological relations through which it is perceived. As John Fordham argues, when the contemporary British novelist Christopher Isherwood announces, “I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking,” he encourages reflection on rather than acceptance of the pretence of authorial passivity. Similarly Rukeyser, as Fordham argues with respect to Isherwood, employs “a literary device which draws attention to its own mode: to that which, at the same time as it evokes the documentary style, brings into question the assumption of an objective realism” (183).

Fordham continues that the critique of realism articulated through the deployment of modernist technique was, for socially engaged writers like Isherwood, underwritten by a Marxist concern to destabilise the “concepts of integration and totality” which realism supports, and that “affirm the Hegelian philosophy of ‘idealism’ which, in its concentration on the movement of history toward some conflict-free individual or social ideal, ignores the real fissures and flaws in human society” (184). In this respect, the description of the scene of the photographer in the tenth stanza of “The Road” develops the political implications of the poem’s earlier attention to the importance of readerly competence and self-reflexivity. Rukeyser shows us that we must pay attention to the nature of ideology as a material force, “a productive social agency in its own right” (Kalaiddjian 73) in order to maintain some role for human interpretation as an intervention into the pre-determined movements of history; just as the tenth stanza offers a reflective pause in the course of the poem’s winding, downward descent. Without paying attention, as Rukeyser does here, to the material circumstances which condition our ideological understanding, MacDiarmid warns us in “Third Hymn to Lenin” that we become “fools who live by headlines else,/ surfriders merely of the day’s sensations,” unable to “fathom and solve” the degrading circumstances of industrial poverty (“Third Hymn to Lenin”).

The final two stanzas of “The Road” encapsulate the push and pull of Rukeyser’s pragmatic Marxism, generating momentum from the tension between the individual and their history. In this sense, the concluding stanzas of “The Road” function as an overture to the collection as a whole which balances poems of lyric monologue with documentary, or social poems. “The Road” concludes:

John Marshall named the rock (steep pines, a drop (line 31)  
 He reckoned in 1812, called) Marshall's Pillar,  
 But later, Hawk's nest. Here is your road, tying

you to its meanings: gorge, boulder, precipice.  
 Telescoped down, the hard and stone-green river  
 cutting fast and direct into the town. (line 36)  
 ("The Road")

Beginning with a human interpretative act - that of naming the rock - the subsequent ellipsis provides a formal break which mitigates the line's initial didacticism. The vertiginous qualities of "steep pines, a drop" are heightened by the use of enjambment and introduce a geological gradation which cuts across the otherwise horizontal, logical syntax of "John Marshall named the rock (...) / Marshall's Pillar." The interpretative control which John Marshall briefly asserts over the landscape is quickly undermined as the narrative progresses; the authority of "Marshall's Pillar" lapses, transforming the scene to "Hawk's nest." This pendular movement from individual to natural history is then replicated in the descent from lines thirty-three to thirty-four, as the present continuous verb "tying," poised on the edge of stanza eleven, establishes a momentary equilibrium between the reader as interpreter of "your road" and the road itself. The tenuous semantic equipoise between reader and road established in the phrase "Here is your road, tying/ you to its meanings" breaks after the landmark colon which signals the introduction of a geographical taxonomy, "gorge, boulder, precipice"; an ordering of reality based fundamentally on natural rather than human distinctions. In the final two lines, the poem proceeds apace to its conclusion, heralding the beginning of the collection's incursion in to the specifics of the Gauley Tunnel tragedy. The use of the present continuous tense in the poem's concluding line, together with the emphasis on pace and direction, draws the reader's attention to the energy which has been generated in the course of the poem's contrapuntal movement between subjective response and teleological movement; just as heat energy is generated through the effects of friction.

In this respect, "The Road" successfully establishes the methodology of the collection as a whole, which juxtaposes poems of lyrical monologue with those dealing with social history. While Dayton has identified that, in "The Book of the Dead," Rukeyser's use of "these different poetic modes reveal at the level of form different, interdependent aspects of human reality," the emphasis of his argument throughout his

book-length study of this collection creates the impression that her deployment of this original methodology was the poet's end rather than her means (61). Rukeyser's juxtaposition of poems employing the lyric mode with documentary poems within "The Book of the Dead" creates an overall impression of the relation between subjective individualism and historical objectivity similar to that articulated by the Russian theorist (and leader of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) Leopold Auerbach, who, in his 1932 article published in the influential international journal *Literature of the World Revolution*, argued that the proletariat "is the only class whose subjectivism is the historic tendency, the objective result, and the law of human evolution" (qtd. in Murphy 70-71). For Auerbach, as well as the German theorist Otto Biha, there is no distinction to be made between the objective movement of history and the subjective experience of the proletariat. As Murphy relates, Auerbach and Biha were critical of the perceived tendency of American writers, particularly within the Marxist John Reed writers' clubs, to "overlook the subjective individual" in striving for proletarian relevance, thereby failing to "present the sentiments, ideas, and aspirations of our class, or a portion of our class, in their connection with the whole situation of society" (72). Within the context of contemporary theoretical Marxist debate, it is important to remember that more than simply using formal innovation as an end in itself, Rukeyser judged poetry quite literally by the efficacy of its dynamics, the transferences of energy which poems could enact, and to what political end. As I have discussed previously in relation to I.A. Richards and Max Eastman, the political implications of any particular formalised understanding of poetry's relationship to science were keenly felt. The language of science and "energy" permeated contemporary theoretical discussion as to the role of poetry in modern society, as poets of varying political persuasions struggled to maintain a degree of relevance to the modern world.

Rukeyser's conception of poetry as a medium in which "the exchange is one of energy" is similar to the understanding of poetry articulated by William Carlos Williams in "The Poem as a Field of Action" (qtd. in Levi 165). Williams begins this lecture by arguing that, ever since the industrial revolution, the traditional function of poetry as something "beautiful or 'pious'" has been steadily eroded (282). Interestingly, in this essay Williams identifies the primary challenge faced by poetry in the wake of the industrial revolution as commercial, rather than aesthetic or philosophical. He argues, "money talks, and the poet, the modern poet has admitted new subject matter to his dreams – that is, the serious poet has admitted the whole

armamentarium of the industrial age to his poems” (282). Mixing Freudian terminology with ideas from what he refers to as “modern physics,” Williams declares that “The poem is a dream, a daydream of wish fulfilment but not by any means because of that a field of action and purposive action of a higher order because of that” (281). The phrase, “a field of action” suggests that Williams conceives of poetry as a dynamic medium in a way similar to that evinced in Rukeyser’s statement in *Life of Poetry* that the poem “is not an object; the poem is a process” (qtd. in Levi 165). Drawing on Einsteinian theories of relativity in order to support his call for reform in the use of poetic metre, Williams, like Rukeyser, uses scientific terminology to develop a sense of poetry’s direct relationship with the outside world. Williams’ indignant rhetorical challenge, “Do we think we (poets) stand outside the universe? Or that the Church of England does? Relativity applies to everything” echoes Rukeyser’s lament that critics, “pull it (poetry) away from their own lives, from the life of the poet, and they attempt to pull it away from its meaning, from itself ... then, cut off from its life, they see the dead Beauty” (Williams 283, Levi 165).

While both writers conceive of poetry as a dynamic process which interacts directly with external reality, the perceived social impact of poetry differs between the two. In “The Poem as a Field of Action,” Williams stresses the degree of influence which scientific developments (and their consequences) have on the poet. He argues, “one great thing about ‘the bomb’ is the awakened sense it gives us that catastrophic... alterations are also possible in the human *mind*, in art, in the arts ... it is possible.... This isn’t optimism, it is chemistry: Or better, physics” (287). This passage makes apparent a clear, unidirectional logic behind Williams’ thought. Scientific developments, like atomic weaponry, cause massive upheavals in our understanding of the physical world, to which, as Williams argues, the human mind must creatively respond. More than this, by arguing that poetic metre should be used in such a way so that “the relativity of measurements” obey the precepts of Einstein’s theory of relativity, Williams endorses a position whereby principles of scientific understanding directly condition the terms of the aesthetic response which they elicit (283).

In this respect, as Michael Golston argues, “Williams breaks with Pound and other Modernists” by “moving from a theory of poetic rhythm grounded in (racial) body metabolisms, to a theory of poetic measure” based on Einsteinian physics (216). The direction of influence present in his later essays, including “The Poem as a Field of Action” is clear: poetic form must respond to scientific principle. Instead of employing



traditional forms such as iambic pentameter which, as Golston argues, Williams identified as deriving from the individual, from “the beat of the heart itself,” he argues that poets should be responsive to the “calling for a different measure” precipitated by the relativism of modern physics (213). In contrast, Rukeyser’s interpretation of Gibbs’ work relating to the second law of thermodynamics - as well as her reading of the American philosopher and logician Charles S. Peirce - provides her with a more fluid and less didactic model of understanding poetry’s position within the relationship between science, art and society. In *Life of Poetry*, she argues that “The giving and taking of a poem is, then, a triadic relation. It can never be reduced to a pair: we are always confronted by the poet, the poem, and the audience” (qtd. in Levi 166). Whereas in Williams’ “The Poem as a Field of Action” the emphasis is on the effects of “the bomb” (as a symbol of scientific development) on the individual mind, Rukeyser is careful to include the “audience” in her conception of the “dynamical” process which poetry enacts (qtd. in Levi 166). Including the audience in her model of poetry as a dynamic process, Rukeyser is attentive to the ways in which poetry engages with wider society.

In *Life of Poetry* she directly attacks (unnamed) proponents of the “New Criticism” who, she feels, in their practice of “dissecting poetry into ideas and things” and “counting words as they might count the cells in a body,” interpret poetry “in terms of a static mechanics” (qtd. in Levi 163). For Rukeyser, these critics develop a morbid understanding of “poetry itself as fossil poetry,” allowing only for a stultified, apolitical understanding of poetry as “dead Beauty” (qtd. in Levi 163, 165). In contrast, the very language in which Rukeyser articulates her theoretical concept of the “triadic relation” presents poetry as a crucible of energies, manifesting a “climate of excitement and revelation” in which the poet, poem and audience interact (qtd. in Levi 166). Similar to MacDiarmid’s argument in “Second Hymn to Lenin” that poetry is “A means o’ world locomotion,/ The maist perfected and aerial o’ a’ which “like politics maun cut/ the cackle and pursue real ends,” Rukeyser conceives of poetry as a revolutionary nexus; a transformative political power in its own right (“Second Hymn to Lenin”).

Positioned midway in the sequence, the poem “Alloy” depicts the town of Alloy, West Virginia, originally named Boncar, where the steel processing plant that produced the ferrosilicon compound was located. In this poem, Rukeyser paints a stark and debilitating landscape, exposing the effects of the appropriation of space under capitalist ideology. I use the term “landscape” here in the sense defined by Brian Jarvis in

*Postmodern Cartographies*, of landscape as a “composition of socially constructed spaces” (44). Jarvis defines this term in the course of outlining the late twentieth century Left’s “displacement of attention from the temporal to the spatial,” which he interprets as “symptomatic of a crisis of faith in the grand narratives of classical Marxist prophecy” precipitated by postmodern theory (46, 45). However, in arguing that the “turn to geography” is characteristic of the Left’s response to postmodern theory, Jarvis overlooks a prior American Marxist tradition of identifying and critiquing the role of the landscape within political history (Jarvis 45). In “Alloy,” Rukeyser highlights the relationship between space, ideology and industry. The poem begins:

This is the most audacious landscape. The gangster’s  
stance with his gun smoking and out is not so  
vicious as this commercial field, its hill of glass.

Sloping as gracefully as thighs, the foothills  
narrow to this, clouds over every town  
finally indicate the stored destruction.

Crystalline hill: a blinded field of white  
murdering snow, seamed by convergent tracks;  
the travelling cranes reach for the silica. (“Alloy”)

In these opening lines, Rukeyser explicitly identifies the capitalist exploitation of geographical space as a form of violence. The phrases “commercial field” and “hill of glass” echo the transferred epithets of “wealthy valley” and “chalk hotel” found earlier in “The Road,” as Rukeyser once again shows that human engagement with the land is inherently mediated by the dominant ideology of capitalism. In the third stanza, the phrase “a blinded field of white” refers to the white dust of the silica deposits found in this land. Yet this phrase also alludes to the page of the poem itself as a blank field, suggesting a figurative link between narrative and geographical topographies.

In highlighting the way in which our reading of the land is mediated via capitalist discourse, Rukeyser undercuts the romanticized aesthetics found in the work of contemporary American regionalist artists such as Thomas Benton, John Steuart Curry and Grant Wood, who, as Stephen Coppel argues, reacted against the abstraction of European modernism by painting scenes of rural America (24). As Coppel argues, in turning their attention away from depictions of metropolitan life to imagery of the rural

Midwest, the Regionalists “represented a rejection of internationalism and of outside European influences for an art that was singularly American” (24). While contemporary regionalist art represented a rejection of European abstraction, Rukeyser’s poem makes visible the implicit processes of abstraction involved in any interpretation of the land, by demonstrating the impossibility of depicting a purely “natural” landscape, positioned outside of political discourse. Similarly, in his book *Technics and Civilization* (1934), the historian Lewis Mumford identifies “abstraction” as a key process which has, historically, linked capitalist development with the exploitation of space. He argues that notions of space changed fundamentally with the development of capitalism after the medieval period. “Between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century,” he argues, “Space as a hierarchy of values (as evident in the religious allegory of medieval cartography) was replaced by space as a system of magnitudes” (Mumford 22).

In Mumford’s view, processes of abstraction were central to the development of modern capitalism, and had a profound effect in changing human understandings of the relationship between space and time. He argues, “The categories of space and time, once practically dissociated, had become united: and the abstractions of measured time and measured space undermined the earlier conceptions of infinity and eternity” (22). Mumford critiques the insidious, self-reinforcing nature of the relationship between the abstractions of capitalism and modern science. He opines, “One abstraction re-enforced the other,” “the power that was science and the power that was money were, in the final analysis, the same kind of power: the power of abstraction, measurement, quantification” (24-25). In discussing the role of abstraction within capitalism and science, Mumford, like Rukeyser, specifically addresses the relationship between capitalism, time and space and at the same time attacks the symbiotic historical process in which “the merchant accumulated capital by widening the scale of his operations ... discovering new territories for exploitation; the inventor carried on a parallel process by exploiting new methods of production” (Mumford 26). Acknowledging the spatial critique of capitalism evident in the thirties writing of both Mumford and Rukeyser allows for a fuller understanding of the intellectual heritage behind “the current spatialization of the Marxist critical tradition” which Jarvis identifies as originating primarily as a reaction to postmodern theory (43).

However, it is important to bear in mind that although Mumford, like Rukeyser, was concerned by the mutually reinforcing nature of the relationship between capitalism

and science, he viewed this relationship as an accident of history rather than being orchestrated. In discussing the influence of capitalism on technological development he argues, “Enough here to notice the close historical association of modern technics and modern capitalism, and to point out that, for all this historical development, there is no necessary connection between them” (Mumford 43). While critical of the ways in which science has been used to sustain the capitalist system, Mumford, like Rukeyser, sees the potential of certain aspects of science and technology to foster progressive social change. He argues that “our modern technology has, in its inner organization, produced a collective economy and its typical products are collective products. Whatever the politics of a country may be, the machine is a Communist” (354). In theory, the machine should contribute to the development of a communist society, as the mass production and consumption which it enables should serve to eliminate social hierarchy or distinction. Mumford’s statement regarding the politics of the machine echoes Rukeyser’s laudatory quotation of Balfour Stewart’s remark that “heat is the communist of the universe,” and highlights the ways in which the writers of the Left engaged with ideas from science to validate their political position. In Mumford’s view, the “muddle and chaos” of modern industrial society is partly attributable to the dissonance which results from applying modern technology, which he views as having an inherently collectivist function, to the service of capitalist ends (283).

Similarly in “Alloy,” Rukeyser critiques the violence engendered in the industrial processes central to the functioning of modern capitalism. As “Alloy” continues, Rukeyser follows the progress of the processing of silica. She writes:

And down the track, the overhead conveyor  
slides on its cable to the feet of the chimneys.  
Smoke rises, not white enough, not so barbaric.

(line 10)

Here the severe flame speaks from the brick throat,  
electric furnaces produce this precious, this clean,  
annealing at last the crystals, fusing at last alloys.

Hottest for silicon, blast furnace raise flames,  
spill fire, spill steel, quench the new shape to freeze,  
tempering it to perfected metal.

(line 18)

(“Alloy”)

The inexorable forward movement of the poem, conveyed in the phrases “down the track,” and “at last” combined with the use of enjambment between lines ten and eleven - which mimics the movement of the conveyor belt – acts in accordance with the temporal causality implied by the second law of thermodynamics. As discussed earlier, the Presbyterian morality behind nineteenth century understandings of thermodynamics supported capitalist ideas of productivity and labour, as scientists such as William Thomson articulated the view that mankind had a duty to maximise the exploitation of energy, while it was still available in its useful form. In lines ten to eighteen, Rukeyser’s poetics pays heed to this economy, maximising the transformation of energy from the processing plant to the page through the use of vivid, intensive imagery such as “severe flame” and “electric furnaces.”

However, the didactic regimentation of the industrial process which Rukeyser describes is not sustained to the poem’s conclusion. While the bulk of the poem adheres to the causal temporal progression of the “time’s arrow” implied by the second law of thermodynamics, the final two stanzas make visible the entropic movement for which the law accounts. The poem concludes:

The roaring flowers of the chimney-stacks (line 22)  
 less poison, at their lips in fire than this  
 dust that is blown from off the field of glass;

blows and will blow, rising over the mills,  
 crystallized and beyond the fierce corrosion  
 disintegrated angel on these hills. (“Alloy”) (line 27)

The unpredictable movement of the dust, suggested by the varied and repeated conjugations of the verb “to blow” signal the poem’s progression to an entropic state. No matter how efficient the mechanised process which the steel plant or the poem enacts, energy increasingly dissipates over time, levelling towards a state of equilibrium. As the dust traverses the blank space between lines twenty-four to twenty-five and blows “beyond the fierce corrosion” of the chimney-stacks, the poem charts the physical process by which energy becomes increasingly disorganised and dispersed, escaping the economic and spatial terms of the capitalist system whose presence, signalled in the phrase “field of glass,” we move beyond. Dayton suggests that

Rukeyser's "innocent and deadly" "disintegrated angel," being a product of labour, resembles yet contrasts with "the angels in Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, who are unwittingly attractive and dangerous to mortals" (101). Indeed, Rukeyser's concluding image highlights the painful disparity between the beauty of classical mythology and the poisonous reality of industrial manufacture.

However, the use of the adjective "disintegrated" not only reinforces the sense of entropy present in these concluding stanzas, but also introduces a spatial element to this tacit political critique, allowing the image to be interpreted positively as an active disassembling of the Christian mythology which historically supported the functioning of a capitalist ideology predicated on the appropriation and exploitation of space. Discussing medieval history, Mumford succinctly summarises the way in which religious mythology provides an allegory of values which conditions human engagement with space. He describes how during the Middle Ages, "spatial relations tended to be organised as symbols and values," for example, "Space was divided arbitrarily to represent the seven virtues or the twelve apostles or the ten commandments or the trinity" (18). Mythology is shown to have a direct bearing on geography, as Mumford argues, "Without constant symbolic reference to the fables and myths of Christianity the rationale of medieval space would collapse" (18). In light of this contemporary Marxist argument, the fact that Rukeyser's angel is "disintegrated" suggests a positive dismantling of the religious mythology which, historically, provided an ideological framework for the territorial expansions of European colonialism and the American pursuit of Manifest Destiny, and which thereby furthered the devastating reaches of capitalist enterprise. As the movements described within "Alloy" progress to a final state of equilibrium, the image of the "disintegrated angel" in the last line provides an allegorical symbol of the concomitant movement effected by the poem itself, beyond the capitalist topography with which, as demonstrated in the phrase "blinded field of white," it has been inevitably implicated. In sum, "Alloy" addresses the socio-political dissonance generated by the use of machine technology for capitalist ends, yet in so doing articulates a move from industrial violence to a scene of physical equilibrium which, as shown in the earlier discussion of *Willard Gibbs*, Rukeyser associates with social "equilibrium" or equality.

The poem "Power" follows "Alloy" and allegorizes the physical descent into the walkways beneath the power plant as a descent into hell, as suggested by the allusion to Dante's *Inferno* in the opening line of the fifth stanza, "This is the second circle, world

of inner shade” (“Power”). The poem carries the reader in a relentless descent into the mine, shunted along by the six occurrences of the preposition “down” and directed also by the unusual formal typography in which Left-justified, elongated shafts of stanzas are connected by the precipitously right-justified, four-syllable joins of “The stairs. Descend” (line forty-two) and “And still go down” (line sixty-two). The inexorable downward thrust of the poem leads to a concluding scene suggestive of the dystopian concept of the heat-death of the universe which, as discussed earlier, had been such a potent figuration of degeneration borne of the fin de siècle anxieties of industrial Britain. “Power” concludes:

Down the reverberate channels of the hills  
the suns declare midnight, go down, cannot ascend,  
no ladder back; see this, your eyes can ride through steel,  
this is the river Death, diversion of power,  
the root of the tower and the tunnel’s core,  
this is the end. (“Power”)

The phrase “suns declare midnight” is a direct allusion to the idea of “heat-death” as a state of universal rest, after which time energy (derived ultimately from the sun) becomes unavailable for work. As Dayton argues, having been shepherded in our descent by “the engineer Jones” who sees only the beauty of his creation, the poem traces “a journey into literal darkness, but also a figurative journey into the night of the man’s skewed vision” (104). In so doing, the poem demonstrates that man’s fetishistic interest in technologies of power is driven by an ultimately futile desire to stave off the fearsome state of morbidity and rest latent to capitalist interpretations of the second law of thermodynamics.

Positioned immediately after “Power,” “The Dam” begins with a statement which contradicts the last line of its predecessor. Rukeyser writes, “All power is saved, having no end” (“The Dam” 99). This statement is a reference to the first law of thermodynamics; the law of the conservation of energy which states that energy can never be destroyed, only converted into different forms. While the conclusion of “Power” offers a satiric eulogy to the “Death” of energy in its “useful” forms, “The Dam” celebrates the transformative capacity of energy in all its myriad states. The poetics of “The Dam” mimic the function of the hydroelectric process which it

describes, transforming potential to kinetic energy. The poem builds momentum in the opening stanza:

Water celebrates, yielding continually  
 sheeted and fast in its overfall  
 slips down the rock, evades the pillars  
 building its colonnades, repairs  
 in stream and standing wave  
 retains its seaward green  
 broken by obstacle rock; falling, the water sheet  
 spouts, and the mind dances, excess of white.  
 White brilliant function of the land's disease. ("The Dam" 99)

The typography of the poem here reflects the initial movement of the water through the dam; the shorter, controlled opening lines spilling over to lengthier measures as the water teems past an "obstacle rock." Just as earlier in "The Road," the highway functioned as a metaphor for history, in "The Dam" Rukeyser engages directly with MacDiarmid's favoured trope of employing water as a metaphor for a teleological, progressive view of history which is evident, for example, in his poem "Water of Life" where "The river keeps its course and ranges/ Unchanged through a' its changes" ("Water of Life"). The third stanza brings the physical and poetic process to a pitch, as "The Dam" reaches the "major climax" of:

energy  
 total and open watercourse  
 praising the spillway, fiery glaze,  
 crackle of light, cleanest velocity  
 flooding, the moulded force. ("The Dam" 99)

Commenting on these lines, Thurston remarks that Rukeyser "blurs the subject-object relationship by deferring predication," as "the piling up of participles prevents sentence completion" (62). In this respect, the poetics here reinforce a Marxist historical perspective which, as discussed earlier, refuted any distinction between the objective movement of history and the subjective experience of the proletariat. Thurston neatly summarises the overall impetus of the dam's poetics, arguing that in this poem, "Rukeyser stages the continuous struggle between stasis and ecstasy, enclosure and



explosion, for only in the tension with the forces that would block it is the water's potential energy realized" (65). Indeed, the poem builds to a heady conclusion, in which the hydroelectric poetics of "The Dam" power a final, persuasive call for proletarian revolt:

Effects of friction: to fight and pass again, (line 97)  
 learning its power, conquering boundaries,  
 able to rise blind in revolts of tide,  
 broken and sacrificed to flow resumed.  
 Collecting eternally power. Spender of power,  
 torn, never can be killed, speeded in filaments,  
 million, its power can rest and rise forever,  
 wait and be flexible. Be born again.  
 Nothing is lost, even among the wars, (line 105)  
 imperfect flow, confusion of force.  
 It will rise. These are the phases of its face.  
 It knows its seasons, the waiting, the sudden.  
 It changes. It does not die. ("The Dam" 102)

Shulman notes that Rukeyser "suggests an affinity between the power of the water and a struggling working class" (229). Certainly, the phrase "Effects of friction" clearly identifies the description of the water's movement as a metaphor for class struggle. Again, the use of enjambment mimics the waves of the water's movement, portraying a deluge which dramatizes the transference of energy necessary to enact political change. The phrase "Nothing is lost" is a re-iteration of the poem's opening line; a poetic echo which demonstrates the law to which it alludes- the first law of thermodynamics which states that energy is only ever converted into different forms, never destroyed. The use of the word "phases" here tacitly alludes to Gibbs' phase rule, which, as Rukeyser expressed in *Life of Poetry*, provided her with "a language of transformation" for poetry. While the dam at Gauley Bridge generated power and profit for the Union Carbide Corporation, the poetics of "The Dam," in contrast, articulate an alternative energetic transfer, from political potential to the powerful movement of class revolt. The flowing, enjambed sentences between lines 97 to 104 transform into the short, simple pulses of lines 105 to 109; the newly balanced and controlled measure suggestive of a similarly altered political scene. Finally, "The Dam" articulates a transformative poetics which mimics the physical process of an exchange of energy that

the poem describes, manifesting the “capacity to produce change in existing conditions” which, for Rukeyser, was not only the chief political function of poetry, but its ultimate end (qtd. in Levi 165).

Responding to the pressures faced by poetry in the wake of science’s increasing cultural authority, Rukeyser stressed the affinities between science and poetry as acts of creative imagination which have an impact on the surrounding world. Rukeyser was deeply influenced by Josiah Willard Gibbs’ contribution to the field of thermodynamics. She drew on the idea of entropy that his work made available in order to lend support for her political understanding, reconciling temporal determinism with an idea of creative transformation. In *Willard Gibbs*, Rukeyser challenged received models of the categorisation of knowledge which she perceived as being linked to the suppression of humanity’s revolutionary potential. Emphasising the essential creativeness of the arts and sciences, Rukeyser conceived of poetry as a dynamic, transformative political force and realised this understanding in her poetic praxis.

Rukeyser’s engagement with scientific thought is unique among the poets considered in this thesis. As I have demonstrated, however, her engagement with science was conditioned by the issue of the changing cultural status of poetry during the 1930s. Rukeyser’s poetry and critical writing illuminate the salience of this issue for the literary Left more widely and also the way in which the issue of the changed status of poetry was felt to impact upon its revolutionary potential. In this respect, my analysis of Rukeyser’s work provides the contextual grounding for the next chapter, in which I discuss, in more detail, the understanding of the relationship between poetics and political revolution within the thirties literary Left.

## **Chapter 2: The Poetics of Class-Consciousness: Reading Genevieve Taggard in the Context of the *New Masses*.**

Genevieve Taggard (1894-1948) was a poet and activist vocal within the American left from the 1920s to the 1940s. As such, she belongs to a generation of American political poets whose work has been largely forgotten as a result of the post-war New Critical paradigm which enjoyed enduring success in its effort to separate politics from poetry as part of the public positioning and defence of literariness in the wake of political turmoil. Taggard participated fully in the animated cultural and literary scene surrounding the American Communist Party during the Depression-Era. When the influential radical Left magazine *New Masses* was founded in 1926, she became a contributing editor. Taggard's contribution to the magazine involved her participation in a range of intellectual debates and the publication of several of her poems within its pages. While the small body of extant criticism on Taggard's work has focussed on critical analysis of her published volumes of poetry, this chapter provides a fresh reading of Taggard's poetry which pays explicit attention to the typographical, artistic and discursive context in which it would have been most widely appreciated, through publication in the *New Masses*. In so doing, this chapter adopts a methodology attentive to the poetics of the political movement in which Taggard's work was positioned, thus allowing for an investigation of Taggard's specific contribution to the development of a poetics of class-consciousness within the thirties literary left.

The very small body of existing scholarship on Taggard's work has focussed attention on her published volumes of poetry, particularly on the explicitly political 1936 volume entitled *Calling Western Union*. For example, Nancy Berke's chapter on Taggard in *Women Poets on the Left – Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, Margaret Walker* (2001) provides a comprehensive and in-depth discussion of the relationship between public and private discourse in this collection. Donna M Allego adopts a similar focus in her article "Genevieve Taggard's Sentimental Marxism in *Calling Western Union*" (2004), while elaborating on the extent of Taggard's engagement with a tradition of "sentimental Marxism" within American Literature. Berke's "*Calling Western Union: Party Lines and Private Lines in Genevieve Taggard's Poetry*" remains

the only chapter-length study devoted to Taggard's work published in book form. Because Taggard's work has been overlooked, critical studies such as those produced by Berke and Allego that provide an exegesis of a particular volume of poetry have been important in establishing a focus from which to embark on a re-appraisal of an otherwise forgotten poet.

The significant lack of scholarly attention devoted to Taggard and her contemporary generation of political poets necessarily forces us to reflect on the critical implications of the strategies whereby we bring them back into a sphere of critical awareness. The work of Cary Nelson has been invaluable in drawing attention to the ways in which the methodological approaches we use in re-claiming poetry which has been either forgotten or wilfully dis-remembered inform and structure a contemporary portrayal of the social function of poetry and this in turn shapes our broader cultural understanding. A significant intellectual principle that galvanizes Nelson's two major studies of 1930s proletarian poetry, *Repression and Recovery* (1989) and *Revolutionary Memory* (2003) is the idea that the processes of remembrance and forgetting involved in the writing of literary history are intrinsically tied to contemporary culture.

In this respect, Nelson's work shares with that of Peter Bürger a commitment to historicizing our understanding of the political function of art and to recognizing that the dominant idea of art as autonomous from practical reality is a product of bourgeois ideology. Bürger argues, "the autonomy of art is a category of bourgeois society.... This detachment of art from practical contexts is a historical process" (Bürger 46). As Bürger states, "'the category of 'autonomy' does not permit the understanding of its referent as one that developed historically'" (46). The hypostatization of the idea of art's dissociation from everyday reality within bourgeois ideology has obscured an understanding that this idea is a product of historical development. Acknowledging that our understanding of the political function of art is a product of historical development allows for a greater degree of reflection about the political nature and effect of our own critical practices. Specifically for Nelson, "modern poetry remains a contested terrain; its still-shifting image is central to how we define *ourselves*" (*Repression and Recovery* 178). The methodology scholars employ in constructing literary history is both conditioned by and in turn inflects contemporary understandings of the social function of literature.

This point was recognised by Left-wing critics during the 1930s, who were aware of the importance of identifying and celebrating an American revolutionary

literary tradition to provide a sense of continuity and historical grounding to the contemporary proletarian literary scene. For American critics in particular, the general need to establish a sense of continuity was supplemented by the necessity of asserting the bona fide indigeneity of a socialist and communist literary movement. Literature could provide American communism with cultural roots. The critical rhetoric of the Left during the thirties reinforces this sense that critics must awaken to their profound political duty to construct a literary past and present adequate to the glorious future that such a foundation would support. A clear example of this logic can be found in critic Newton Arvin's 1936 review of the first - and still definitive - anthology of American proletarian literature, *Proletarian Literature in the United States: An Anthology* (1935). In his review, Arvin acknowledges the significance of *Proletarian Literature* as a text whose publication is a foundational event that provides concrete physical and cultural validity to the amorphous conceptual terrain of American proletarian literature. In reviewing the anthology, Arvin self-consciously acknowledges the specific role of the left-wing critic as witness to this cultural and political event, as distinguished from the more conservative notion of the critic as being merely an expositor of the text. He states that the publication of *Proletarian Literature* is "far from being one more "publishing event" that he [the critic] is required to say a word about" (12). Instead, the anthology is to be regarded as "a many-voiced expression of the America of his own time" (Arvin 12). "All proletarian writers," Arvin continues, have an obligation to "save from the black night of fascism all of the past that is really humane and of good report. Particularly the literary critics ... are bound by this obligation, whether they will or no" (14). The importance of an individual perspective is of subordinate concern relative to the efficacy of the critic's role in identifying and continuously re-constructing a usable past. That the critic should recognise and accept his functional duty is imperative within the context of the United States, where, in order to be usable on any mass-level, the Left literary past must be constructed as inherently and authentically American lest communism be dismissed as alien, other and exterior to American national identity. Arvin concludes his "final point" in the review thus, "Particularly American critics are bound by the obligation to keep alive all that was creative and hopeful in their national past, and to reassert it to the everlasting and irredeemable discredit of all that was, and is, destructive and damnable" (14). While the specifics of critical praxis were the subject of heated debate among the literary Left during the 1930s, Arvin's review is representative of the strong overall awareness and degree of

self-conscious reflection about the political function of literary criticism. As John Lowney notes, the “preoccupation with cultural memory” characterised not only the 1930s, but successive generations of poets who came of age during the Depression years, and “whose historical consciousness was radically affected by the socioeconomic crisis” (*History, Memory and the Literary Left* 3).

This Left preoccupation with cultural memory is of particular importance when seeking to re-appraise the role *New Masses* played in shaping the literary and political culture of the thirties. Writing in his introduction to *New Masses: An Anthology of the Rebel Thirties* (1969), Maxwell Geismar discusses the specific way in which remembrance of *New Masses* had to be suppressed in order not to disrupt the revisionist, anti-Communist narrative of American cultural history that emerged during the 40s and 50s. Geismar describes clearly the sense of alienation from his own cultural memory that he experienced in the wake of the 1940s. He writes, “As a literary critic emerging from the 1930s ... I wondered particularly why I had so misunderstood the epoch of my own youth. I had always thought of the Thirties as a brilliant, lively, exciting and hopeful period” (Geismar 6). However, he continues ironically, “I was wrong, it seemed. I had been deceived. The Thirties had been a period of deceit and disenchantment, of failure and frustration, of political conspiracy and agit-prop” (6). For Geismar, the culture of the Cold War period invalidated his positive memory of Left literature of the 1930s. *New Masses*, in particular, was the subject of intense revisionism. Geismar argues, “I remembered the *New Masses* . . . . But it was the *New Masses* in particular which was at the centre of all this revisionist history of the 1940s and 50s. It was the *New Masses* in particular which was the object of abuse, attack, invective, and of ponderous accusations” (6). The central role played by *New Masses* in shaping Left literary culture of the period is indicated by the force of its subsequent suppression. Geismar concludes, “If the thirties were to be blocked out completely from the national consciousness – as dangerous a thing for a nation as for an individual – then the *New Masses* was at the center of what appeared to be a cultural and literary trauma; and what we have recently discovered to be a cultural and literary “fix”” (6). In re-investigating the historical and cultural processes which have informed subsequent understandings of the 1930s, particular attention must therefore be paid to *New Masses* as occupying an important, yet contested position within discourses surrounding the 30s literary Left.

The idea that the appreciation of literature is structured by historical, material and physical contingency was recognised by political poets and critics of the thirties. For example, poems such as Albert Morton's "Jottings on a Salesbook," published in the June 16, 1936 edition of *New Masses*, expresses an idea of poetry as an active form of political expression, snatched in fleeting moments during the working-day. The negative form of the adjectives in the poem's first two lines highlights the disparity between the reality of working-class experience and traditional modes of poetic representation, "Earning bread in the unbiblical sweat of other people's feet/ Sing me the unheroic saga of the shoe salesman" (Morton 13). Poetry is snatched from small spaces found in the working-day, "Phrases between customers to make in many weeks a poem." Cumulatively, Morton suggests, the poems snatched from the temporal lapses within the rigorously structured day can contribute to the forging of class-consciousness, "Gather up phrases now, the harvest interlude,/ Phrases to sow in tired minds to make in many weeks a union" (13). While T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" makes visible a process wherein fragments of a mythologized past can be collected to protect against the splintered subjectivity of modernist consciousness - "These fragments I have shored against my ruins"- Morton's poem suggests to its readers an alternative process of discursive formation, wherein a poetics of class-consciousness is gathered in moments snatched from the working-day (Eliot). The cumulative nature of this discursive process – emphasised here by the near repetition "gather up phrases" and "gather phrases" suggests that, for the working classes, poetry can provide a means of articulating a continuity of experience and identity absent from the quotidian reality which capitalist society determines is commensurate to the sum of its existence. By gathering up phrases, Morton's poem suggests, poetry provides a means of articulating a cumulative discourse capable of representing the continuities and shared experience of working-class life. However, the poem's progression to a concluding point where the articulation of a revolutionary class-consciousness can no longer be suppressed, "How long before we quit/ This amiable drawing back of lips?" is interrupted by parenthetical interludes where the salesman must tend to a customer, "(Yes, Mr. Hanson, 9 tomorrow, sure, Mr. Hanson)," offering a rhetorical demonstration of the material contingencies which inevitably structure working-class engagement with literature (Morton 13). Poems such as Morton's "Jottings on a Salesbook" articulate an understanding of poetry as conditioned by the material circumstances in which it is conceived and interpreted.

An appreciation of the material and political usages to which poems were put within the Left is necessary to fully understand their signification. Attentiveness to what Jerome McGann refers to as “the bibliographic text” is necessary to appreciate fully the material circumstances of a poem’s reception and to understand the broader discursive context in which the poem was situated (McGann 105). By analysing Taggard’s poetry in the context of *New Masses*, I employ a methodology which not only allows insight into the discursive context in which her poetry reached a wide audience, but which also reflects the poetics of the literary Left more generally, which challenged received notions of poetic and authorial integrity. The scope and volume of poetry associated with the Left, and the wide range of formats ranging from trade union newspapers to dedicated arts periodicals in which it was published posits an active and flexible model of readership capable of looking past the boundaries of individual poets, or individual poems, to participate in a broader literary and political conversation.

Nelson employs the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism to describe the way in which poems published in the temporally immediate and aesthetically collaborative form of newspapers and journal publications participated in an inter-textual discursive environment. He argues that in the political poetry of the 1930s, “the shift in epistemology of composition meant ... poetry was thus in the immediate materiality of its signs dialogic – engaged in a continuing dialogue both with other poetry and with the other discourses and institutions of its day” (*Repression and Recovery* 157). Similarly, Walter Kalaidjian argues that the collaborative publishing practices of thirties editors embodied a strategy deliberately designed to foster collective class-consciousness. He cites the claim made in the 1931 “Manifesto” published in the journal *The Rebel Poet* that collaborative publishing “broke the way for the international recognition of our fellowship as the militant voice of class-conscious poets, poetry-lovers, and writers everywhere” (52). As Kalaidjian further comments, group collections of poems provided a means to challenge the encroachment of the market into the field of literary productivity, de-stabilising “what Lucia Trent and Ralph Cheney described as the poetic ‘star system’” (52). In his article “Writing and Writers” published in the April 21, 1936 edition of *New Masses*, critic Isidor Schneider argues that the true creativity of writers can only be realised by relinquishing bourgeois ideals of individual self-expression and through participation in the revolutionary social movement. Schneider writes, “In turning ‘Left’ and giving up bourgeois careers most of these writers realize that they have taken leave of a shadow,” meaning that they have departed from the un-glamorous



and minor role which society, for the most part, accords to them (22). He continues, “And they realize that their creative work in this medium has an additionally creative element. It is participation in the one action that can create a society in which they can live as writers and as human beings, in which they can fulfil themselves functionally and economically” (22). In calling for writers to give up the folly of self-expression and support the publication of group collections, writers and critics such as Schneider, Cheney and Trent developed what Kalaidjian refers to as a “transpersonal theory of poetry, one that differed from the impersonal poetics of high modernism” (53). These critics called for writers and readers to look beyond the confines of individualist notions of identity or authorial and formal integrity in favour of engaging in a collectivist political and aesthetic praxis.

## **2.1 “You’ll never be the same again”: Reading the New Masses in the 1930s.**

The dialogic semiotic experience constructed by a journal such as *New Masses* reinforces an overt political aim to challenge dominant ideas of bourgeois subjectivity and therefore makes possible the awakening of class-consciousness. Indeed, the *New Masses* in particular utilised design elements intended to foster a sense of direct, collective participation among its readers. The paper on which *New Masses* was printed was cheap; the magazine was to be *used* rather than coveted. Features of *New Masses* such as the regular “Between Ourselves” column (a society page for Communists) create a coercive sense that the reader is to view him or herself as a valued comrade, a trusted collaborator whose act of reading the magazine establishes his or her position firmly *in the know*. Michael Thurston notes that “Like the frequent and very pointed cartoons, *New Masses*’ parodies, articles, book reviews, and even advertisements share an aggressive tone and a fairly coherent, though by no means unified, point of view” (24-25). Overall, Thurston concludes, “the *New Masses* conveys, even constructs, a community among its readership through layout, design, editorial policies and statements, and, of course, the texts the magazine circulates” (25). Moreover, like other magazines, the *New Masses* continuously signalled its position within a broader Left cultural configuration, frequently carrying advertisements for its sister publications. For example, the July 14, 1936 edition of the *New Masses* printed a full-page advert for *The Nation* which included a line graph detailing subscription figures for the last fourteen years and an extensive list of contributors. The fact that the *New Masses* carries this advert lends *The Nation* a significant endorsement. The strength of the advert relies on

its ability to position the reader firmly within the community to which most of the *New Masses* and *The Nation* belong. The graph showing paid subscription figures shows a steady incline in figures from 24,000 in 1922 to 30,000 in 1924, before fluctuating from 1924 to 1927. Then, from 1927 to 1928, there is a sharp increase in paid subscriptions from 29,000 to 37,000. The figures then fluctuate again until 1935. The right-hand margin of the graph concludes in 1936 where, as is written onto the graph, the figures once again reach "the previous high" of 1928. To read the graph from left to right is thus to follow a trajectory of success; the final sharp incline of the line suggesting an inevitable exponential



**Figure 1 - "The Nation's Circulation." *New Masses*. 14 July, 1936. Print.**

increase in subscribers. The commentary printed below the graph states, “*The curve of circulation continues to rise*. Every advance means an accession to the movement for an American social system that makes some sense” (The Nation). To buy a magazine

like *The Nation* was to participate in an advancing Left social movement; the commentary makes clear that the positive trajectory of the graph is a direct metaphorical representation of the advance of the masses. Printing an extensive list of names of contributors alongside the graph reinforces the reader's understanding of him or herself as belonging to this political and cultural community. The names of the contributors, including for example, Mark Van Doren, Louis Adamic, Ruth Benedict, Peggy Bacon, Kenneth Burke, would be familiar to readers acquainted with the Left cultural scene, as regular contributors for a range of publications and participants in debate and other social events.

Indeed, social events revolving around literature were frequently advertised in *New Masses* and other periodicals, suggesting that they played an important role in establishing a sense of social cohesion and participation in a shared cultural endeavour. Taggard herself starred as a "headline act" at certain of these events. For example, her name was featured prominently on an advertisement for a series of "Three Courses" in "Modern Poetry" to be conducted in San Francisco, including a discussion of contemporary poets such as Conrad Aiken, Carl Sandburg, Wallace Stevens, Rupert Brooke, and "Lessons in Verse-Craft," described as "a study of verse as an objective craft" (Three Courses). Poetry was the subject of active, communal discussion and provided a platform for collective socio-cultural engagement.

Furthermore, the self-referential and mutually supportive nature of Left periodicals fostered a sense of collective collaboration, standing in marked contrast to the status of high cultural magazines such as *The Dial*, whose austere design signalled its unique presence as a cultural artefact. The publishing practices of the literary Left were deliberately inter-textual, providing a discursive framework which supported a political enterprise of mass, collective social action. As Nelson argues, through reading journals today, we can "begin to recognize the strategic, dialectical, and exclusionary relations between poetry and the other discourses of the time" (*Repression and Recovery* 199). If we confine our reading of thirties poetry solely to anthologies and books of poems, it becomes "actually impossible to judge what kind of discursive terrain poetry occupied, what social, political, and aesthetic functions it served" (*Repression and Recovery* 199). However, more than just engendering a sense of comradeship, to read a magazine like *New Masses* was to submit to an experience wherein you, as the reader, would have your sense of self fundamentally challenged. The surface irony of a May 19, 1936 appeal for more subscribers, for example, only just

mitigates the subtle threat of the advert's claim that "You'll never be the same – now that you have read New Masses" (New Masses). This full-page advert splits the page vertically into two, separated by a thick black line. The message just mentioned is printed on the Left hand side, with the essential phrase "You'll never be the same again" appearing in large type. The importance of this message is reinforced by the large amount of white space surrounding it, which sets it off from the subordinate, conditional clause, "now that you have read," which is printed in smaller lettering. At an immediate surface level, the formal typography of the page works to undercut the

**You'll never be the same again**

— now that you have read

**NEW MASSES**

NEW MASSES, 31 East 27th Street, New York.  
Please send me New Masses regularly, as indicated.  
1 year, \$4.50 ( ) 6 months, \$2.50 ( ) 3 months, \$1.25 ( )  
I Enclose \$ . . .

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_  
Occupation \_\_\_\_\_

**MAIL THE COUPON TODAY!**

**YOU** may think you can read an issue of New Masses and escape unscathed. But history indicates otherwise. This magazine leaves its mark!

Other less left publications, we fear, will never satisfy you again. You'll be impatient with the temporizing of even those which call themselves "liberal." You'll discover how impossible it is for news to be "neutral." You'll find you want a paper that takes sides openly and fearlessly, on war moves, gag bills, "mutiny" strikes, professional problems. And you'll rush to the newsstand for a copy of New Masses every week.

But why go to all this trouble? Why miss a single issue? Take our experienced word for it, and get New Masses every week on a regular subscription. In fact, why not?

Figure 2 - "You'll never be the same again." *New Masses*. 19 May, 1936. Print.

only-just ironic declaration. The stark poise of the essential message on the page's left-side is offset by the more substantial textual presence of three tightly constructed paragraphs on the right. However more generous the volume of the text on the page's right, though, the content of this text fails to comfort to the same degree as its visual

effect. It begins, “You may think you can read an issue of *New Masses* and escape unscathed. But history indicates otherwise. This magazine leaves its mark!” (New Masses). Clearly, the threatening language was intended in an ironic fashion to arouse interest through its dramatic effect. However, the truth from which this irony is generated is that Left periodicals such as *New Masses* did intend to fundamentally change the way in which their readers understood the relationship of self to world, with the discursive juxtapositions and creation of a collectivist intellectual milieu deliberately unsettling dominant bourgeois understandings of the self as seen to be determined by an identifiably unique subjective experience. Bridging the typographic and ontological divide in this advert between the prior self to which one will never return, and the *post facto* self indelibly stamped by the mark of the *New Masses* is a coupon for subscription that is positioned in the lower half of the advert, cutting through the thick black line that otherwise severs the page. Visually, the positioning of the coupon suggests that subscription to the *New Masses* offers a means to participate continuously in the re-configuration of the self, performed through reading this periodical. The ultimate suggestion is that subscription will facilitate the perpetuation of this re-invention, relinquishing the laborious necessity of the weekly “rush to the newsstand.” As the advert queries, “Why miss a single issue?” (New Masses). Indeed, why lapse outrageously into your former sense of self?

While I have drawn on Nelson and Kalaidjian’s general understanding of the “dialogic,” “transpersonal” nature of Left poetics, the following analysis will focus specifically on the position of Taggard’s work in relation to the fundamental challenge to bourgeois ideas of selfhood and lyric expression advanced by the thirties literary Left as part of a collective cultural effort to articulate a poetics of class-consciousness.

## **2.2 Genevieve Taggard and the Critique of Individualism**

Taggard challenged received notions of authorial integrity and intentionality and a dominant critical perspective which unselfconsciously adopted these ideas as the starting-point of any subsequent critical exegesis. Her article, “Romanticism and Communism” published in the September 25, 1934 edition of *New Masses* explicitly attacks the idea of the individual, and the concomitant aesthetic of individual expression which, she argues, romanticism supports. Bluntly, she states that “Communism implies a faith that cannot be reconciled to the truths of the *Declaration of Independence* and Rousseau’s *Social Contract* and Shelley’s poetry ... Communism is based on a much

deeper understanding of man” (“Romanticism and Communism” 18). Communist engagement with the Romantic tradition was part of the broader process of cultural re-territorialization practiced within the 1930s Left. This engagement was problematic, with writers and critics adopting a range of often conflicting positions. Within the context of international Communism, for example, Taggard’s attack on the Romantic tradition stands in direct contrast to the position adopted by Hugh MacDiarmid who, in his lengthy, un-published poem “Design for the Ballet,” presents a positive account of Romanticism as a “vernacular movement,” “nothing more or less indeed/ in its historical origins/ than a people’s art” (“Design for the Ballet” 88, 89). However, in “Romanticism and Communism” Taggard argues that the enduring legacy of Romanticism has prevented the development of a critical practice based on assumptions other than that which support bourgeois ideas of the relationship between self and society. She argues that, “We are so much a part of Romantic ideology ... that we find it hard to realize that all the Romantic dogmas are mere half-truths” (“Romanticism and Communism” 18). Addressing the role of criticism in perpetuating Romantic ideology, she continues “If we had more critics who were not bound to serve middle-class ends, we would be aware of the very significant fact that in general all literature ... before the rise of the middle class to power in the nineteenth century, proceeded from another set of assumptions” (18). In Taggard’s understanding, Communism involves an explicit critique of a Romantic discourse on selfhood. She writes, “In Marxian theory, as I hope I am understanding it, is a principle that contradicts the spirit of nineteenth century romanticism. The doctrine that man is essentially good and potentially perfectible has been fully exploited by capitalism” (18).

It is notable that Taggard’s understanding of Communism here involves a rejection of the idea of man’s perfectibility, as this was by no means an established idea within the American Left. Indeed, the editorial postscript appended to this article qualifies Taggard’s attack on the notion of man’s perfectibility. “The Editors” (Michael Gold, Granville Hicks, Joshua Kunitz, Herman Michelson, Joseph North, Ashley Pettis, William Randorf) specifically address Taggard’s implication that Communism rejects the concept of man’s perfectibility. They argue that “This is a misstatement since it is precisely because Communism believes in the perfectibility of man, that it works for a system in which, through discipline and social institutions, man can perfect himself” (“Romanticism and Communism” 20). They argue instead that “The contrast is rather between the anarchic anti-social individualist generated by Capitalism, which exalts the

ego, and the socially-motivated institutions of Communism which adjust the relationship of the individual to society” (20). The relative unease of the editorial postscript (in addition to the very fact of its presence) indicates the extent to which Taggard’s explicitly held belief as to the nature of man’s inherent imperfectability dissented from orthodox opinion. Despite the qualification of the postscript, Taggard is clear that her support of Communism is rooted in her belief in its capacity to construct a productive and functional society from an imperfect base. She writes, “a social theory that aims to build a society that will make it impossible for one class of men to exploit other men, is clearly based on a realistic and sane acceptance of man, that imperfect animal” (19). Later on the same page, Taggard repeats this point emphatically, “Communism faces the first fact of man’s imperfection and weakness with the only possible moral and realistic plan of action” (19). In Taggard’s view, the cultural and institutional arrangements of a future Communist society would function to produce a symbiosis between “the good of the individual and the good of society” (20). The “great power of Communism,” she states, is that “it uses self-interest with human idealism, making the two work together, harnessing this energy as it would energy in a machine, incorporating both self-interest and idealism in forms that will last” (20). In Taggard’s view, Communism embodies a social vision that exposes the falsity of the dichotomy between self and society supported by Romanticism. She argues, “the futile dilemma of the liberal and the Romanticist – Individual versus society – is a false, a manufactured, not an inevitable problem” (20). In her interpretation, Communism dissolves the premise on which this dilemma is based, allowing for an understanding of the “individual” only in terms of the society of which he is part. Indeed, in *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels drew on Hegel’s historicization of the process of self-conception in attempting to articulate an idea of subjectivity removed from any essentialist or trans-historical quality. They argue that “man’s ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man’s consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life” (Marx and Engels 489). Following from Marx and Engels’ critique of the fact that the “social consciousness of past ages” has historically made possible “the exploitation of one part of society by the other” Taggard maintains that “Communism is moral in the only true sense – it insists that the individual find himself in relation to the people with whom he lives” (Marx and Engels 489; “Romanticism and Communism” 19).



Marx argues in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) that “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (Marx and Engels 3). However, as Donald Hall argues, he “also suggests clearly that a broad meta-consciousness is possible whereby men come to understand how such consciousness-determining ‘property relations’ are in fact ‘fetters’” (Hall 54). As Hall explains, “this inside/outside movement of consciousness is, in fact, the process through which one gains a critical awareness of ‘ideology,’ of politically consequential, social belief that has been passed off as natural fact” (55). For Taggard, art can play an important function in allowing the individual to correctly perceive his place in society. In her opinion, the signifiatory function of art is determined by its social reception. Taggard writes, “Meaning implies audience, implies society” (“Romanticism and Communism” 18). Specifically, the signification of literature is inseparable from a broader discursive context because, for Taggard, words are “a common possession, a social tool” (18). In her view, Romanticism perverts the social function of art by divorcing meaning from any wider social context. She queries, “if the Romanticist, the extreme individualist, denies the reality of society, the mind of his audience, the community of agreement, the experience and mutual understanding behind words and symbols, how can he do anything but abuse and pervert his meaning?” (18). In this view, art achieves significance by capitalising on its full discursive and social potential. Looking beyond Romanticism, Taggard argues that “we see another use of meaning, which is right and proper. We see meanings in perfect accordance with society; we see symbols that have the large simplicity of universal recognition.... We see the poet using symbols ... with perfect regard for the prevailing meaning the symbol had for the audience” (18-19). Taggard’s view of the social determination of artistic power emphatically involves a specific attentiveness to the nature of language as a social tool, “Words have no meaning except in context – that is, in relation to each other” (19). The test of a good poet lies in “his ability to divine the emotional and intellectual power of words when released in the mind of an audience” (19). Importantly, Taggard’s advocacy of artistic practices which recognise and capitalise on their own social function involves an explicit critique of the idea of the individual self, which, she argues, has been supported by Romanticism. She writes forcefully, “Only after the false principle of the individual, a little universe sealed away from all the rest of life, has been ridiculed to death, can the proper function of poetry be understood” (19). In maintaining the notion of the



individual self, Romanticism prevents the realisation of poetry's capacity to function in a way that allows the individual to understand himself in terms of the society of which he is a part. In this view, Romanticism is a pernicious movement that maintains what Taggard refers to as "the fiction of personality" (19). In her understanding, the immorality of Romanticism lies in its promotion of an aesthetic of individualism, and "since the individual can only achieve grandeur *in scale*, he must gain it by some form of deprecation of his fellows and society" (19). However, poetry which challenges individualist aesthetics can be an important tool in the fight for Communism. Taggard concludes her article by arguing that "the best art is the work of society, the artist is the only efficient cause; poetry's only vitality, like the vitality of society, lies in Communism" (20).

In light of this discussion, it is possible to expand upon the claims made for Taggard's work within the small body of existing feminist criticism. For example, Allego's argument that Taggard's work embodies a process of "consciousness raising" by complicating "the working class's limited perceptions of the female gender role" does not account for the way in which Taggard's work participated in a broader Communist cultural endeavour to fundamentally challenge ideas of subjective consciousness and individualist politics (Allego 38, 43). Taggard's attack on the Romantic "cult of genius" echoes similar statements made by figures on the Left, such as Upton Sinclair's earlier statement that "A socialized world cannot be built upon an individualistic ethic" or Bruno Frank's later assertion that the writer "should also not regard himself as a demigod or prophet, and, above all else, he should never claim for himself the privilege allowed to all prophets of being tedious" ("Review and Comment" 22).

Taggard's argument in "Romanticism and Communism" that the false principle of the individual self must be ridiculed to death in order for the political function of poetry to be realised echoes Edwin Rolfe's declaration in his 1931 poem "Credo" that "To welcome multitudes – the miracle of deeds/ performed in unison – the mind/ must first renounce the fiction of the self" ("Credo" 59). For both Taggard and Rolfe, the mass political movement necessary to the establishment of Communism is predicated on the development of a poetics which supports the articulation of a collective consciousness and that interrogates a reductive tradition of lyric expression. In an introductory frontispiece to a November 2, 1938 edition of Taggard's *Collected Poems* (1918-1938) Taggard states, "Since the earliest attempts at verse I have tried to use the

‘I’ in a poem only as a means for transferring meaning to identification with anyone who takes the poem, momentarily, for his own. ‘I’ is then adjusted to the voice of the reader” (“Frontispiece”). Taggard uses poetry as a means of re-working the political effect of inherited grammatical structures, with the “I” as marker of subjective power (that power which *does the verb*, an actant on the world) re-fashioned to demarcate a position of shared experience, signalling the possibility of social ventriloquism. Furthermore, the thesis which Taggard outlines in “Romanticism and Communism” accords with the poetics of the *New Masses* itself which, as discussed earlier, attempted to re-define the social function of poetry in order to challenge dominant bourgeois views of the relation between self and society. More than simply “consciousness raising,” then, Taggard’s work contributes to a deeper and more wide-ranging discourse of the thirties Left which sought to challenge notions of bourgeois subjectivity and work towards the development of a poetics of collective class-consciousness.

### **2.3 Taggard’s Poetics of Collective Class-Consciousness**

Turning now to literary analysis, I will focus my attention on those poems published in *New Masses* which demonstrate most clearly Taggard’s commitment to the development of a class-conscious poetics, namely “Life of the Mind, 1935,” “A Middle-Aged, Middle-Class Woman at Midnight...” and “The Definition of Song.” Her poem, “Life of the Mind, 1935” published in the January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1935 edition of the periodical directly addresses the relationship between literature, class-consciousness, and political action. The poem is printed as shown in Figure 3 below.

# Life of the Mind, 1935

GENEVIEVE TAGGARD

*The words in the books are not true  
If they do not act in you.*

Fret fools the days away,  
Best-sellers for their food,  
And bad philosophy,  
Fret fools.

But we,

We dare not read for long.  
We snatch our thought, our song,  
As soldiers do their meat.  
Necessity to eat,  
Necessity to act,  
And act aright, renews  
The mind's link with the arm.  
Imperative to choose,  
Imperative to do,  
Our time's dynamic form.

Once we were students—then  
Grave faces hours poured  
Over the activity stored—  
The energy of great men.

That time must come again.  
If not for us, for those  
We will to endow once more  
With the tested word-in-deed.  
Poetry and the great prose

Born in a like uproar  
Where someone had to bleed.

The battle of the mind,  
Tranquillity, too, the kind  
Quick teacher's face, the jest,  
Keen argument with a friend,  
That sport and the sweet zest,—  
All fall, must fall, behind.  
That time is at an end.

Now action like a sword.  
Now to redeem the word.  
Now blood for stubborn proof  
No one may cut apart  
Word from the living deed,  
Or live this life aloof.  
Fear is a flimsy creed.  
*"I believe with all my heart."*  
In the one way to believe:  
*"This thing is good—I give  
My living to see it live."*

Bleak thought and a bastard art,  
How easy to relinquish both!  
So to be wise, so learned  
If never more returned  
To temporary peace.  
So not to die of sloth  
Or live best-sellers' ease.  
But to stand upon our oath.

Figure 3 - Genevieve Taggard. "Life of the Mind." *New Masses*. 1 Jan., 1935. Print.

The title of the poem foregrounds its concern with the relationship between thought and politics. Moreover, the title establishes a tension between a generalised, abstract theorisation of this relationship - achieved by means of the lack of the definite article before "Life"—and the suggestion of the specificity of this historical understanding, achieved through the inclusion of the year's date, 1935. The historical specificity accomplished by the presence of the date, taken in collocation with the presence of the definite article before "Mind," tacitly suggests that the general argument that the poem will set forth regarding the relationship between literature, class-consciousness, and political action, relates to the poetics of *New Masses* itself which, in this first issue of 1935, celebrated the first anniversary of its inauguration as a weekly publication. The personification implied by my argument that Taggard alludes here, to the "mind" of *New Masses* itself is supported by the self-referential imagery used to

represent the event of the weekly magazine's birthday. Indeed, the first page features a cartoon image of the magazine personified with a smiling face, wearing a napkin around its neck and grasping cutlery, sitting in front of a birthday cake decorated with a single large candle. The headline next to the cartoon reads "We Light Our First Candle at the New Masses Birthday Party" ("We Light Our First Candle" 1). Any sense of alienation felt towards the grotesque nature of this grinning, gastronomically excitable cartoon magazine is mitigated by the coercive textual gesture affected by the use of the collective pronoun, "We" in the headline. This image embodies the material child (aged one year old) of the *New Masses* readership's collective imagination. The rhetorical tension between

abstraction and historical specificity in the poem's title, then, speaks subtly to the wider context of this poem's publication, the celebration of the maturation of a cultural community.

The poem begins with an italicised rhyming couplet, "*The*

*words in the books are not true/ If they do not act in you*" ("Life of the Mind, 1935").

The opening couplet is economically didactic, making clear the poem's message regarding the political function of literature. The rhyme between "true" and "you" reinforces this message, making the association between literary and political action seem natural. Beginning the next stanza with a sentence in which the predicate comes notably before the subject, "Fret fools the days away," Taggard dismisses the pacifying, palliative role played by popular literature in everyday life. The primary positioning of the verb "Fret" in relation to the subject "fools" underwrites the critical irony of Taggard's sentence; the active strength of the verb's grammatical position emphasizes, by way of contrast, the wasteful deficiency of the action it describes. The dismissive tone sounded by the initial two fricatives contributes to the lackadaisical satire of the stanza's three short following lines, "Best-sellers for their food,/ And bad philosophy,/ Fret fools." For Taggard, best-sellers are junk food of little edifying value. The

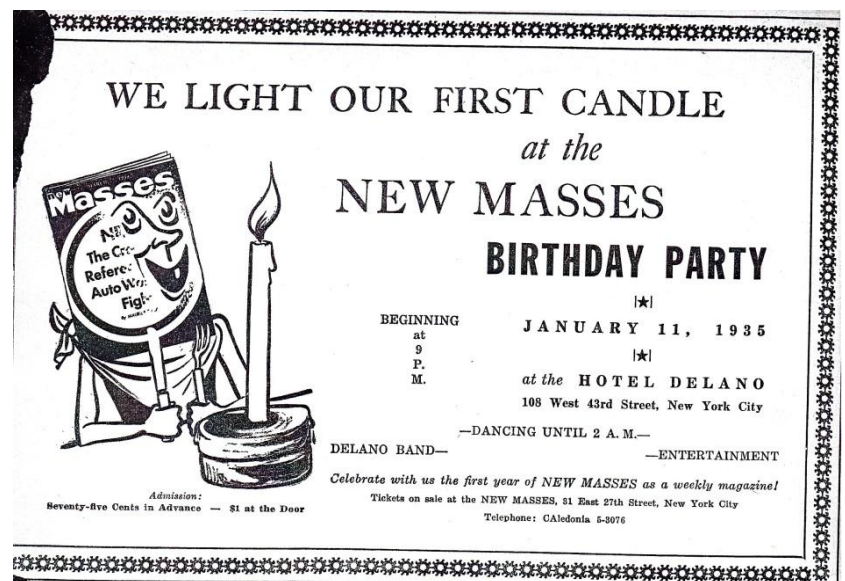


Figure 4 - "We Light Our First Candle." *New Masses*. 1 Jan., 1935. Print.

repetition of “fret fools” from the stanza’s first to final lines suggests that nothing is achieved through the intervening consumption of commercial fiction; the outcome of this digestive process is indistinguishable from the initial input.

However, there is a shift in argumentation as we approach the next stanza, emphasized by the formal typography. Between the Left-justified type of the second and third stanzas, Taggard positions two centrally-justified monosyllabic words, “But we.” Like the “We” of the birthday message on the opening page of this *New Masses* edition, the use of this pronoun establishes the reader’s sense of belonging to the imagined community associated with *New Masses*, personified earlier by the figure of the birthday cake. The position of the word “we” falls on a line directly below the word “their” in the line “best-sellers for their food,” drawing attention to the oppositional, “us and them” discourse thereby established. Following the pendular movement from the second to third stanzas, pivoted on the lynchpin “But we,” Taggard now addresses the important political function that poetry can play in working class life. Similar to Morton’s “Jottings on a Salesbook,” Taggard’s poem addresses the way in which working class engagement with literature is necessarily informed by the material and temporal conditions of daily life; the opening couplet of the third stanza reads, “We dare not read for long./ We snatch our thought, our song” (“Life of the Mind, 1935”). This stanza continues

As soldiers do their meat.  
Necessity to eat,  
Necessity to act,  
And act aright, renews  
The mind’s link with the arm.  
Imperative to choose,  
Imperative to do,  
Our time’s dynamic form. (“Life of the Mind, 1935”)

The line “As soldiers do their meat” reinforces the contrast established in the move from the second to third stanzas, as the analogy between eating and creative thought suggests a process of literary consumption that is active and productive, rather than lazy and wasteful. This analogy between gastronomic and literary consumption is carried forward by the equally weighted metrics of the couplet, “Necessity to eat/ Necessity to act”; the urgency of these lines suggesting that this poem, too, is snatched from a busy

day. The lines “And act aright renews/ The mind’s link with the arm” brings the analogy between literary and intellectual consumption to bear on the question of political action, expressing clearly the idea that it is through political action that the worth of intellectual endeavour is most fully realised. This view is also expressed earlier in somewhat different terms by Taggard in her contribution to the debate in the January 1927 edition of *New Masses* surrounding the question, posed in a questionnaire drawn up by the editors, “How Should the artist adapt himself to the machine age?” (“How Should the Artist Adapt” 6). In response to this question, Taggard writes forcefully, “Practical men run revolutions and there’s nothing more irritating than a person with a long, vague look in his eye when you’re trying to bang an army into shape or put over an N.E.P.” (“How Should the Artist Adapt” 6). If art is to be useful, it must directly inform political action. In turn, revolutionary political action alters the function of the mind, as she states in “Life of the Mind, 1935,” “act aright, renews/ The mind’s link with the arm” (“Life of the Mind, 1935”).

The idea expressed in the poem’s opening, that art has the capacity to re-configure the self in a way that supports collective political change, is reflective of the political effect of the poetics of *New Masses* more generally. Further, Taggard’s specific use of anatomical imagery here also engages with a particular conception of the “body politic” metaphor present in the 30s American Left. Waldo Frank gives a clear articulation of this metaphorical understanding in his June 1935 address to the International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture, printed in the first joint edition of *Partisan Review & Anvil* (1936). In his “The Writer’s Part in Communism,” Frank draws heavily on a particular conception of the body politic metaphor that likens physical to political maturation. In this defence of culture, Frank argues that:

The revolutionary hour in which we live is but the present phase of the process ... whereby man (not a privileged, exploiting class, but man as a whole) will emerge into a conscious culture; even as the child at a certain physiological stage must become adult or go down into degeneration.” (Waldo Frank 15)

For Frank, the development of cultural consciousness is linked rhetorically to the physical development of man, just as Taggard’s poem articulates a discourse which restores “the mind’s link with the arm” (“Life of the Mind, 1935”). Frank uses anatomical imagery to develop a rhetorical metonymy in which the development of

class consciousness within the general body politic becomes inseparable from the physical and mental development of any one of its members. In this sense, Frank's adaptation of the "body politic" metaphor provides a metaphorical framework for a model of political empathy. In a particularly eloquent passage, Frank outlines his "View of human history as one organic body, growing by tragic effort towards consciousness and justice; it is the view of the individual (insofar as he is *real*) as the integer of this body, so that the health of the whole and the health of every part are one; it is the view of universal meaning as inherent in material behavior, and therefore of society, becoming by its actions the immanent presence of timeless value" (Waldo Frank 15). Frank's particular adaptation of the body politic metaphor here is a rhetorical strategy that allows him to succinctly express a relatively complex theoretical understanding of the relationship between individual subjectivity and the objective movement of history. Frank's conflation, here, of the individual as "integer" with world history, reflects the influential theoretical position regarding this relationship set forth by the Russian theorist Leopold Auerbach, who, in his 1932 article published in the international journal *Literature of the World Revolution*, argued that the proletariat "is the only class whose subjectivism is the historic tendency, the objective result, and the law of human evolution" (qtd. in Murphy 70-71). For Frank, as for Taggard, political action brings the working-class to understand its correct position within history, "becoming by its actions the immanent presence of timeless value," just as "act aright renews/ The mind's link with the arm" ("Life of the Mind, 1935").

For Frank, art has an important role to play in facilitating the particular perception of the relationship between self and world - of "universal meaning as inherent in material behavior" – necessary for class revolution (Waldo Frank 15). He expresses his understanding of the importance of art in negative terms, lamenting the consequences of artistic practices that fail to provide "man" with a social vision that allows him to correctly identify the material circumstances of his existence with the movement of history. Frank argues, "All such systems [of nineteenth century socialism] indicate the contempt for human life when man is cut off from his primitive participation in the cosmos without finding a conscious synthesis (the task of the writers!) to replace it: all, regnant in the vulgar revolutionary thought of Western Europe and America, strike at the very heart of revolutionary meaning" (Waldo Frank 16). The revolutionary "task of the writers" then, is to produce work which allows "man" to synthesize his experience with that of the "cosmos," producing "the final

integrity,” the “final completeness which is organic consciousness, the *knowing* harmony of all the parts, making them move to life, making them breathe together” (Waldo Frank 17). In concluding his article, Frank argues that the role of the writer is to facilitate the perception of the “organic” worldview necessary to instigate revolutionary action. “This,” he states finally, “is the function of the writer” (17).

Frank’s idea that one of the preconditions of revolution is the articulation and dissemination of a worldview that provides “man” with a functional, and politically instrumental vision of his role in the world anticipates late twentieth century Marxist Fredric Jameson’s argument that “without a conception of the social totality (and the possibility of transforming a whole social system), no properly socialist politics is possible” (355). In making this argument, Jameson states that he draws both on Louis Althusser’s formulation of “ideology” as “the Imaginary representation of the subject’s relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence” and the urban planner Kevin Lynch’s suggestion that “urban alienation is directly proportional to the mental unmapability of its cityscapes” (Jameson 353). Applying Lynch’s spatial analysis to the social sphere, by way of Althusser’s idea of ideology, Jameson uses the phrase “cognitive mapping” to describe the process by which an individual subject coordinates, or maps, their imagined relationship to the totality of lived experience (Jameson 353). Jameson’s argument that “the incapacity to map socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience” echoes Frank’s earlier condemnation of political and cultural movements that fail to apply “revolutionary terms, to *the whole man*” and dim “further our enfeebled sense of wholeness from which alone fertility and power issue” (Jameson 353; Waldo Frank 19).

Conversely, Jameson argues that “an aesthetic of cognitive mapping is in this sense an integral part of any socialist project,” because the success of socialism is dependent on a representational model that permits the working-class individual to perceive his or her position as part of the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated. Again, this argument reflects Frank’s earlier charge to writers that they must produce work that allows man to synthesize his experience with that of the “cosmos.” Like Frank, Jameson discusses the problem of “cognitive mapping” in terms of aesthetics. The importance of aesthetics to Jameson’s idea of “cognitive mapping” arises because of its dependence on Althusser’s idea of ideology as an “imaginary representation.” In Jameson’s understanding, aesthetics are of critical importance to the success of socialism, insofar as socialism relies on a particular imaginative



representation of the individual's relationship to the totality of social relations. In this respect, Jameson distinguishes aesthetics from other disciplines such as science or the social sciences, arguing that it is aesthetics alone that addresses the issue of mapping everyday individual reality onto broader social experience, thus echoing Frank's earlier emphasis on the important role played by the arts in the development of socialism. In his articulation of the concept of "cognitive mapping," Jameson argues that he is deliberately infringing "so many of the taboos and shibboleths of a faddish post-Marxism" (353). In so doing, as I have here shown, Jameson develops a theoretical perspective that in some respect echoes a much earlier Marxist understanding of the central importance of the arts to the advance of the Left. In turn, his articulation of the concept of "cognitive mapping" provides an analytical shorthand useful in addressing the concern present in the thirties literary Left to demonstrate the essential function of art in the advance of revolutionary politics. For both Frank and Jameson, then, the success of socialism is fundamentally dependent on the integrity of a socialist aesthetics.

Returning now to Taggard's "Life of the Mind, 1935," it is possible to appreciate more fully the relationship between literature, the self, and political action that this poem puts forth. Moving onto the fourth stanza, Taggard writes:

Once we were students---then  
 Grave faces hours poured  
 Over the activity stored---  
 The energy of great men.

That time must come again.  
 If not for us, for those  
 We will to endow once more  
 With the tested word-in-deed.  
 Poetry and the great prose  
 Born in a like uproar  
 Where someone had to bleed. ("Life of the Mind, 1935")

In the fourth stanza, Taggard draws on the rhetoric of "energy" in a way similar to her contemporary Left poet Muriel Rukeyser, presenting the idea that literary material contains a vast store of intellectual power. Shifting from the past to present tense in the fifth stanza, Taggard argues that this reserve must be exploited in the service of political

ends. Through her use of the compound noun “word-in-deed,” Taggard shows the inseparability of discourse and political action. As Nelson has argued, this sense of a united cultural and political front often represented within the thirties Left. For example, the cover of the 1933 anthology of radical poetry, *We Gather Strength* includes an image of a book alongside other tools (a wheel, a pickaxe and a spade) and the hammer and sickle, which stretch diagonally across the page, thereby representing visually the centrality of literature to the class struggle at the same time as “invoking solidarity with the Soviet Union and expressing the collection’s politics” (Nelson *Revolutionary Memory* 154).

In this 1935 edition of *New Masses*, Taggard’s poem is published immediately after a news article by William Mangold entitled “Gagging the Guild,” which discusses the sacking of a newspaper worker named Alphonse Tonietti from the New York based Italian-language newspaper, *Il Progreso*. Mr. Tonietti was allegedly fired on grounds of “economy,” but Mangold clearly dismisses this as a cover used by management to disguise their true objection to his participation in union organisation. Occupying a quarter of the same page on which the latter half of this article is published, Taggard’s emphasis on the unity of the cultural and political front lends rhetorical support to an otherwise prosaic condemnation of anti-union management practices in the newspaper industry.

The proceeding lines of Taggard’s poem reinforce this idea of literature’s central position in the class struggle, poetry and prose are “born in a like uproar/ where someone had to bleed” (“Life of the Mind, 1935”). The force of this image here impresses the reader with the strength of a rhetorical manoeuvre that asserts a direct chain of correspondence between words, the body, and political action. For the masses, political action is connected to an intellectual and physical development that wreaks violence upon the enfeebled and anonymous existing social order, represented by the phrase “where someone had to bleed.” For Taggard, poetry has an intimate and even violent relationship to physical reality. Taggard drives home her point in the poem’s penultimate stanza:

Now action like a sword.  
 Now to redeem the word.  
 Now blood for stubborn proof  
 No one may cut apart  
 Word from the living deed,  
 Or live this life aloof. ("Life of the Mind, 1935")

There is an economy of equivalence established here between words, the body and political action; action can "redeem the word," deeds are "living." It is this same failure to realize the social potential of language that Taggard condemns in both her article "Romanticism and Communism" (as earlier discussed) and in her injunction here that "No one may cut apart/ Word from the living deed,/ Or live this life aloof." In this sense, Taggard's rejection of individualism involves the full realization of the social and political function of art. In the poem's concluding lines, Taggard argues that we are not to "live best-sellers' ease/ But to stand upon our oath" ("Life of the Mind, 1935"). Individualism mediated through commercial literary output is here rejected in favour of a politics founded on the integrity of a collective utterance.

"Life of the Mind, 1935" rejects commercially-driven literary practices that support individualism: the opening couplet of the final stanza reads, "Bleak thought and a bastard art/ How easy to relinquish both!" ("Life of the Mind, 1935"). In this poem, Taggard advocates an alternative aesthetics in which the social function of language is fully realized, and that recognises the centrality of poetry to the class struggle. In advocating a model of poetry grounded in the reality of working-class experience, "Life of the Mind, 1935" highlights the political importance of a poetics that allows the working-class individual to develop an understanding of his or her life in relation to the broader class struggle. Or, to use Jameson's terms, she demonstrates the centrality of aesthetics to a process of "cognitive mapping," conducive to class revolt. As the title suggests by means of its ambivalent poise between the abstract and the specific, the development of such a poetics is intimately connected both to the consciousness of an individual member of the working-class, and also to the collective consciousness of the imaginative community herein implied. Printed in the first anniversary edition of the weekly *New Masses*, this poem itself celebrates the magazine's role in the development of a poetics of class-consciousness.

Published in the January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1935 edition of *New Masses*, "Life of the Mind, 1935," appeared at a time when the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) was still in

its ultra-revolutionary, exclusive “Third Period” Phase. The political context shifted, however, after the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International was held in Moscow in July 1935, in which Georgi Dimitroff outlined the broad, inclusive tactics of the “Popular Front” (Aaron 430). The CPUSA responded to the tactics outlined in the July Congress, now emphasising political inclusiveness and adopting a policy of collaboration with all enemies of fascism. The content of *New Masses* changed after 1935 to reflect the altered concerns of the broader political environment. As Daniel Aaron notes, “In the spirit of the benign and indulgent policy of the united front, the Communist editors resolved, in the words of poet-critic Stanley Burnshaw, “to drive away no one who can be turned into a friend of the revolutionary movement” (qtd. in Aaron 275).

The next poem of Taggard’s that I will discuss shortly, “A Middle-Aged, Middle-Class Woman,” was printed in the special 48 page quarterly issue of *New Masses* printed on April 7, 1936 entitled “Challenge to the Middle Class.” This entire issue was given over to an exploration of the role that the middle class, now seen as a potential ally of the working class, could play in the move toward political revolution. While the tactics of the Left had changed, a discourse centred on issues of selfhood and the development of collective modes of consciousness continued to circulate in *New Masses*, underpinning attitudes towards the social function of culture. For example, an advert on page four of this issue asks, “Is Human Nature Changing?” (EduTravel). This advertisement is for a travel company called “EduTravel” that organised educational travel tours in Europe. Potential tourists could choose, for example, between a tour focussed on the study of the European penal system, “Crime and Punishment Abroad,” or a study of foreign education systems, “New Education in the Soviet Union” (also includes England, France and Scandinavia). The tagline argues that “In Europe today basic human hopes are finding new expression” and invites the reader to “see for yourself” (EduTravel).

## IS HUMAN NATURE CHANGING ?

In Europe today basic human hopes are finding new expression—dynamic, fascinating! See for yourself. . . . EDUTRAVEL was created to present travel from this human point of view, to direct your eyes upon the living world! Note these 1936 examples:

**CONTEMPORARY ART AND ARCHITECTURE**  
Featuring interviews with leading artists in 8 countries—auspices of The New School for Social Research.

**LIFE AND LITERATURE IN U.S.S.R.**  
Literature as a social force. Meetings with Soviet writers. Visits also to Denmark, Sweden, Finland. Leader: Lester Cohen.

**CRIME AND PUNISHMENT ABROAD**  
Study of delinquency and reform under Joseph P. Fishman, sponsored by The New School for Social Research.

**NEW EDUCATION IN SOVIET UNION**  
Discussions with leading Soviet educators—visiting also England, France, Scandinavia. Director: Dr. I. V. Sollins. Sailings by all lines.

**POPULAR EDUTOURS**  
Featuring a diversified selection of unusually attractive general European tours—with expert leadership guaranteed.

Write for booklets on these, or for complete EDUTRAVEL program including “Summer Session in Sweden.” Address Dept. NE-1.

**EDUTRAVEL**  
An Institute for Educational Travel  
535 Fifth Avenue New York, N. Y.  
Land tours in Europe in conjunction with Amerap Travel Service, Inc., (in U.S.S.R., in cooperation with Intourist, Inc.).


Figure 5 - EduTravel. *New Masses*. 7 April, 1936. Print.

This advert presents the lives of Europeans as evidence of the progress of the Left. Indeed, organized travel excursions to the Soviet Union had been advertised frequently in *New Masses* since its inception. The Soviet Union provided both geographical and ontological grounding to an American Communist ideal. While Communism in America developed along indigenous lines, the adverts in *New Masses* encouraged readers to see the Soviet Union as an unfolding artefact in which the cultural genesis of the human race is on display. Printed on the Left-hand side of the page beside the endorsement of “EduTravel” is an advert for a competing travel operator likewise offering trips to the USSR. The headline for this particular advert reads, “They go to the Soviet Union more than once,” and is supported by the additional commentary, “One of the best recommendations for a trip to the Soviet Union this summer is the fact that many hundreds of American travellers-abroad have made repeat journeys to the land of the Soviets” (Intourist).

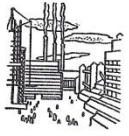
Just as the advertisement with the heading “You’ll Never be the Same Again,” discussed earlier, invites the reader to participate in the

continuous re-configuration of the self, made possible by subscription to *New Masses*, this advert for “Intourist Inc.” suggests that repeated visits to the Soviet Union are necessary for the American tourist to bear witness to the unfolding history of human progress, symbolised in the accompanying drawings of a tractor ploughing a field and a factory with high chimneys bellowing smoke. More than just a beacon of inspiration for the international Left, the Soviet Union provided a geo-political framework that allowed Communists in America to map out their own ideological position in terms of a political reality elsewhere established. Educational tours to the Soviet Union allowed the American Communist to “see for himself” the material development of a projected

## They go to the SOVIET UNION more than once



One of the best recommendations for a trip to the Soviet Union this summer is the fact that many hundreds of American travelers-abroad have made repeat journeys to the land of the Soviets. Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Odessa are easy to reach by fast air, train and boat connections from all European centers. Rates remain at \$5.00 per day third class, \$8.00 tourist and \$15.00 first. These are all-inclusive: Hotels, meals, all transportation on tour, daily sightseeing, trained guide-interpreters. Tours ranging from five to thirty-one days cover the whole of European U.S.S.R. Europe-bound vacationists in 1936 should make a point of getting Intourist's illustrated booklet of Soviet Travel and a large colored map of the U.S.S.R. and Europe. Write for booklet and map No. NM-4.



**APPLY TO YOUR TRAVEL AGENT**

## INTOURIST, INC.

545 Fifth Avenue, New York  
Monadnock Bldg. 681 Market St., San Francisco

Figure 6 – Intourist. *New Masses*. 7 April, 1936. Print.

imaginative vision, reinforced by the structured tourism he or she would have experienced.

The progress of Communism in the American Left of the thirties was explicitly discussed in terms of a re-configuration of individual self-perception in relation to a broader social totality, as in Frank's imperative understanding of the need to apply "revolutionary terms, to *the whole man*" (Waldo Frank 19). That advertisers should adopt the lexicon of historical progress and ask the question, "Is Human Nature Changing" in order to sell tourist trips is, then, indicative of the currency of a particular discourse that circulated within the literary Left of the 1930s, in which political progress was articulated in terms of the development of human nature and the development of class-consciousness more generally.

With the new inclusiveness of the Popular Front came the need to address the issue of class-consciousness as it pertained to the middle-class. While Taggard's earlier poem "Life of the Mind, 1935" had specifically addressed the link between thought and political action in relation to the collective "mind" of the *New Masses* readership, Lewis Corey turns his attention in an article for the April 7, 1936 edition of this periodical to "The Minds of the Middle Class." Corey begins his article with the question, "Is there a middle-class mind?" (Corey 15) If the advance of Communism was seen to be predicated on the development of a collective consciousness in which individual subjects co-ordinated their experiences in terms of broader social relations, then Corey's opening question seems pertinent. It is necessary to first establish whether or not the middle-class has a mind, in order to then determine the susceptibility of this mind to the adoption of a Communist worldview. Corey begins by answering his own initial question in the affirmative.

Importantly, though, he goes on to argue that the middle-class mind only exists in terms of "general ideas." However, he continues, "within the formal acceptance and unity of those ideas are separate minds, determined by different class-economic groupings and interests." In Corey's view, the middle-class mind is fragmented. He argues that there are "at least three 'minds' in the middle-class" (Corey 15). These three "minds" are aligned with particular socio-economic groupings identifiable within the class as a whole. There is the mind of "the surviving independent enterprisers," the mind of "the upper layers of salaried employees [sic]," and lastly there is the mind of "the masses of lower salaried employees and professionals" (Corey 15). Corey argues that each of these minds has necessarily responded to changes in economic relations

brought about by the advance of capitalism. He views the transformation of the middle-class as a result of “the change from the old economic individualism to the new economic collectivism,” by which he means industrialisation and the development of monopoly-based capitalism (15).

Advancing economic collectivism while failing to support any concomitant social collectivism, capitalism leads to a situation in which “A crisis is created in the minds of the middle class” (Corey 16). Corey continues by stating that “All economic changes and class struggles become articulate in the minds of people, in the realm of social consciousness” (16). Capitalism, Corey argues, works to suppress the translation of economic collectivism into a complementary social understanding, thereby leading to a kind of cognitive dissonance where a politics of individualism persists in the face of an altered socio-economic landscape. Adopting a similar perspective, Corliss Lamont argues in his article for this *New Masses* edition, “The Appeal to Reason,” that “middle-class intellectuals, viewing paradoxes such as that of starvation in the midst of plenty, are likely to experience a distinct mental shock” (Lamont 28). In his poem “To My Contemporaries,” Rolfe poignantly describes the traumatic mental processes undergone by an individual with a social conscience as he attempts to negotiate modern life; a man must “partition the skull/ decree which part/ shall live, observe, feel joy and pain, and which vast area grow dulled, the senses, all awareness, killed” (Rolfe 100). In this context, Communism can then be seen as a legitimate and wholly rational response to what Lamont describes as “the continual clash between ideals and actualities” (28). In Lamont’s view, Communism can be seen indeed as the *only* rational solution available to a person with a sense of social responsibility, who finds his “ideal of the good society” in “such terrible maladjustment with reality that he is stimulated towards radicalism” (28). Both Corey and Lamont discuss Communism as a politics borne of a psychological response to the dissonance experienced between a social ideal and economic reality.

In Corey’s understanding, the three “minds” of the middle class respond differently to the inconsistencies in the relationship between economic circumstances and social consciousness. The mind of the “independent enterprisers” rejects collectivism outright, while the mind of the “upper layers of salaried employees” accepts “capitalist collectivism but categorically rejects socialism,” leaving it susceptible to the pernicious idea of “fascism and its totalitarian state of privilege and caste erected on the relations of monopoly capitalism” (Corey 16). Crucially, however,

the mind of “the masses of lower salaried employees” is wholly amenable to socialism because “their economic interests identify them with the working class,” and also because “their minds are functional minds” (16). Ultimately, Corey advocates a Popular Front tactics in which Communism “appeals to the functional minds in the class against the exploiting minds” (16). The essentially fragmented quality of the middle class mind lends itself to Communist influence. Corey argues that Communism must exploit the fragmented nature of the middle-class mind. Corey summarizes, “There are many minds in the middle class: some must be rejected by revolutionary consciousness” (16). Notably, the centrality of the development of consciousness to the advance of Communism is explicitly stated, “No social revolution is possible without revolutionary consciousness” (Corey 16). Ultimately, the “Communist conquest of power” abolishes the socio-economic antagonism that maintains the mental conflict which blocks the full realisation of revolutionary consciousness. In Corey’s concluding words, “in the human civilization that is socialism, they [middle-class minds] become human and universal, moving onward toward man’s increasing mastery of the world and of himself” (16).

Taggard's poem in this *New Masses* edition, "A Middle-Aged Middle-Class Woman..." provides a discursive realisation of the process of mental integration and awakening of a revolutionary class-consciousness in the "middle-class mind" outlined by Corey. The poem reads as follows:

In the middle of winter, middle of night  
A woman took veronal in vain. How hard it is to sleep  
If you once think of the cold, continent-wide,  
Iron-bitter. Ten below. Here in bed I stiffen.  
It was a mink-coat Christmas, said the papers ...  
Heated taxis and orchids. Stealthy cold, old terror  
Of the poor, and especially the children.  
Now try to sleep.

In Vermont near the marble-quarries ... I must not think  
Again, wide awake again. O medicine  
Give blank against that fact, the strike, the cold.  
How cold Vermont can be. It's nerves, I know,  
But I keep thinking how a rat will gnaw  
In an old house. Hunger that has no haste ...  
Porcupines eat salt out of wood in winter. Starve  
So our children now. Brush back the hair from the forehead,  
See the set faces hungrier than rodents. In the Ford towns  
They shrivel. Their fathers accept tear-gas and black-jacks.  
When they sleep, whimper. Bad sleep for us all.  
Their mouths work, supposing food. Fine boys and girls.  
Hunger, busy with this cold to make barbarian  
These states, to haunt the houses of farmers, destroyers  
Of crops by plan. And the city poor in cold-water flats



Fingering the gas-cocks – *can't even die easy*  
*If they turn the gas off.* I'm sick, I tell you. Veronal  
 Costs money, too. Costs more than I can pay.  
 And night's long night-mare costs me, costs me much,  
 I'll not endure this stink of poverty. Sheriffs, cops,  
 Boss of the town, union enemy, crooks and cousins,  
 I hope the people win. ("A Middle-Aged, Middle-Class Woman...")

The poem begins with a description of a middle-class woman taking barbiturates in an attempt to ease herself to sleep on a cold winter's night. However, the reality of the cold and the hardship that it entails for the poor encroaches on the woman's mental comfort, "Stealthy cold, old terror/ Of the poor, and especially the children." As the poem moves from the first to second stanzas, the unease of the woman's sleep is presented in terms of a tension between her medically-induced middle-class torpor and her awareness of the pressing human concerns central to depression-era economics. Taggard refers here to the 1936 marble-workers strike in Rutland, Vermont. As Berke notes, Taggard was herself involved in this strike, she "became both active participant and poetic observer as a member of the United Committee to Aid Vermont Marble Workers" (99). The line "I must not think" is a weak statement of willed ignorance, a rhetorical buffer that fails to withstand the incursion of class-conflict into an otherwise tranquilised mind. The interruption of the woman's sleep is presented here as a form of political awakening, engaging with the discourse present in the articles of Corey and Lamont in which the advance of Communism is linked to the development of a revolutionary consciousness in the middle-class mind.

Indeed, as the poem progresses, the woman's identification with broader social concerns becomes increasingly apparent. The fourth line of the second stanza reads, "How cold Vermont can be. It's nerves, I know." Seemingly straightforward, this line subtly sets the ground for the woman's increasing expression of empathy towards the working-class. The referent of "It's" here is not immediately clear due to the disjunctive nature of this drugged stream-of consciousness narrative. "It's" seems simultaneously to refer to the nerves of both Vermont and the woman herself, suggesting that political empathy has a physiological basis. This line also demonstrates Taggard's engagement with a wider Left configuration of the "body politic" metaphor in which physiological imagery is used to support a rhetorical conflation of individual with communal experience. Mid-way through the second stanza, the children referred to dispassionately in the first stanza become "our children." The ideological process central to Communism, in which individual experience is understood in relation to society more

generally is tacitly suggested by the sentence immediately following the reference to “our children” which reads, “Brush back the hair from forehead,/ See the set faces hungrier than rodents” (“A Middle-Aged, Middle-Class Woman...”). In this line, there is a subtle shift from the singular to the plural, brushing back the hair of a single forehead reveals to the woman the faces of many hungry children. As Berke argues, the woman’s increasing empathy with the working class involves an implicit critique of capitalism, “the capitalist way of life, which has traditionally provided comfort to the middle classes, becomes the culprit: ‘In the Ford / towns / They shrivel. Their fathers accept tear gas and black-jacks’” (103). The sense of identification articulated in the phrase “our children” is intensified by the use of another collective pronoun in the phrase that comes in the eleventh line of the second stanza, “Bad sleep for us all,” which signals the woman’s full involvement now in a process of common political awakening. The dislocated chain of reference produced through enjambment in the sentence “Hunger, busy with this cold to make barbarian/ these states” achieves an effect similar to that of the phrase “It’s nerves,” suggesting a link between physiological and social conditions. The referent associated with the phrase “these states” is ambiguous; the semantic confusion lends support to an association between the socio-political “states” of America, and “states” of being. The strength of this association between physiological and social unease achieves heightened expression towards the end of the second stanza, as the woman now states clearly, “I’m sick, I tell you.” As Berke concludes in her discussion of this poem, the middle-class woman comes to perceive an association between “the metaphoric poverty of her sleeplessness,” and the more dire poverty of the strikers and their families: “Veronal/ Costs money, too. Costs more than I can pay” (Berke 103). Having affected a transition from a description of the alienation of a middle-class mind, to the articulation of that mind’s radicalisation, the poem ends with an affirmation of middle-class revolutionary consciousness, “I hope the people win.”

I will conclude my analysis of Taggard’s *New Masses* poems with a brief discussion of her poem “The Definition of Song,” published in the 19 May, 1936 edition of *New Masses*. Printed in the same edition as the advertisement for subscription to *New Masses* discussed earlier, which featured the line “You’ll never be the same again – now that you have read *New Masses*,” this poem brings together many of the key ideas developed in both “Life of the Mind, 1935” and “A Middle-Aged,

Middle-Class Woman....” As in “Life of the Mind, 1935,” “The Definition of Song” is similarly concerned with the social function of art. The poem reads:

Singing is best, it gives right joy to speech.  
Six years I squandered studying to teach  
Expounding language. Singing it is better,  
Teaching the joy of the song, not teaching the letter.

And of all forms of song surely the least  
Is solo. Only lark in the east  
Foretelling sun-rise, lone singer, can say  
How volume will amplify with the arriving ray ....

So singing is the work of many voices.  
For only so when choral mass rejoices  
Is the lock sprung on human isolation  
And all the many welded into one.

Body sings best when feet beat out the time.  
Translated song, order of bold rhyme  
Swing the great stanza on the pavement – use  
The public street for publishing good news.

Deepest of all, essential to the song  
Is common good, grave dogma of the throng;  
Well-spring of affirmation in accord  
Beneath the chanting utterance, the word.

Song is not static – joy becomes a dance.  
In step, vast unison, in step advance.  
This is the life of song: that it mean, and move  
And state the massive power of our love. (“The Definition of Song”)

In this poem, Taggard’s celebration of song is explicitly tied to recognition of the social function of art and a critique of artistic practices that support bourgeois individualism. Beginning the second stanza, Taggard argues “And of all forms of song surely the least/ Is solo,” thus continuing the attack on a reductive tradition of lyric expression advanced earlier in her article “Romanticism and Communism” (14). This poem propounds an alternative view of art as a social force, “So singing is the work of many voices” (14). Art that realises the full potential of its cultural function provides an aesthetic framework that allows people to see themselves in relation to a broader socio-political reality, “For only so when choral mass rejoices/ Is the lock sprung on human isolation/ And all the many welded into one” (14). Communal artistic forms provide a way to destabilise the ontological boundary between subjective and collective consciousness, enacting the integrative discursive movement articulated in “A Middle-Aged, Middle-Class Woman.” Participating in a broader critique of bourgeois subjectivity present within the literary Left, Taggard’s description here of a process through which the self

is both physically and metaphysically re-fashioned reflects a similar process described by Rolfe in his long poem “To My Contemporaries,” where he states, “It is pain to surrender/ the fugitive fragments of an earlier self./ But the break must be made, the artery severed/ and sewed again, the useless nerve numbed” (Rolfe 100). Both Taggard and Rolfe envisage a poetics wherein self-perception becomes re-made in terms of the altered social relations latent to a Left political ideal: consciousness will be fashioned anew, “you’ll never be the same again.” Drawing on a lexicon of bondage, Taggard’s image of the lock being “sprung” recalls Marx and Engel’s famous declaration that “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains” (Marx and Engels 500). Art, then, is presented here as capable of loosening the fetters of bourgeois subjective consciousness.

Moving to the fourth stanza, Taggard focuses more specifically on the material and social function of literature. As we saw in “Life of the Mind, 1935,” she rejects the way in which individual self-perception is mediated through discourses present in commercial fiction and instead favours a politics founded on the integrity of collective expression. In “The Definition of Song,” Taggard’s rejection of individualism likewise involves an affirmation of the powerful nature of literature as a material tool capable of enacting social and political change. She instructs her readers, “Swing the great stanza on the pavement – use/ The public street for publishing good news.” Clearly, Taggard argues that communal poetics should provide aesthetic support to a social ideal, “Deepest of all, essential to the song/ Is common good.” As in “A Middle-Aged, Middle-Class Woman,” Taggard adopts a metaphorical understanding of the relationship between body and state that supports a subtle conflation of individual with communal experience. An individual step is simultaneously the march of multitudes, “Song is not static – joy becomes a dance./ In step, vast unison, in step advance” (“The Definition of Song” 14). The poem concludes with a resounding affirmation of the capacity of art to set in motion this mass revolutionary movement, “This is the life of song: that it mean, and move/ And state the massive power of our love.” This poem, then, ultimately gives affirmative expression to the choral poetics of the literary context in which it was published where, as Nelson argues, “no poem lived exclusively within its own boundaries” and where poetry was regarded as a transformative political force in its own right (*Revolutionary Memory* 178).

While Nelson’s work has been of paramount importance in identifying the fact that “one of the recurrent issues in 1930s poetry is the necessity of disavowing certain

forms of subjectivity,” I have built on this argument by showing the way in which this disavowal involved the development of a poetics supportive of an alternative Left understanding of subjective experience (*Repression and Recovery* 157). As I have shown, *New Masses* played a central role in changing the way its readership understood the relationship of self to world, providing a textual realisation of the shared imaginative experience of Communism in the thirties. More than simply critiquing one particular model of subjectivity, writers in *New Masses* engaged explicitly with a discourse of selfhood and the mind in order to assess what a class-based model of consciousness would entail. The development of such a model of consciousness was perceived as being of central importance to the advance of the Left, as demonstrated in Corey’s statement that “no social revolution is possible without revolutionary consciousness” (Corey 16).

Within this context, Taggard’s work directly challenged bourgeois ideas of individualism, and emphasised the role of the arts in determining a mode of self-perception conducive to class revolt. Recognising the centrality of literature to the class struggle, Taggard’s poems discussed here allowed the reader to perceive his or her life in relation to the broader social context and worked to articulate the process of mental integration and awakening on which revolutionary political action would be predicated. In so doing, her work makes clear the radical political and philosophical implications of the poetics of the Communist Left more generally, insofar as this poetics provided the methodological framework on which the development of a revolutionary class-consciousness would be based.

This chapter has demonstrated the significance of the relationship between collectivist politics and poetics to the poems discussed here and to *New Masses*, the periodical in which these poems would have been most widely circulated and read. While I have shown that the issue of the relationship between collectivist politics and poetics was important to the Left avant-garde, I will now move on to investigate and assess the extent to which the significance of this relationship was similarly demonstrated at the wider level of collective political action, as manifested in the organised labour movement.

## **Chapter 3: The Role of Education and Literature within the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union**

### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I will discuss the role of education and literature within the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). The literary material distributed by the ILGWU, which consisted mostly of poetry pamphlets and booklets, was produced under the auspices of its nation-wide Education Department. Because the literary material here considered was produced by the Education Department, I will first spend some time considering the role which education played within the ILGWU, what policies the union adopted toward education and how this developed, and what the ideology behind the educational policies was. In order to fully appreciate the significance of the ILGWU's unique engagement with educational issues, some comparison will be made to the contemporary debate and practices surrounding education within the organised labour movement. Having laid this historical groundwork, I will then move on to a discussion of the specific role which literature, and poetry in particular, played within the ILGWU.

### **3.2 "Wiping Out Social Illiteracy": The Educational Culture of the ILGWU**

Founded in 1900, the ILGWU placed a remarkable emphasis on educational and cultural activities from its very inception. The emphasis which the union placed on education was in part attributable to its origin among the Jewish immigrant community who formed the bulk of the labour force in the garment industry in the early decades of the twentieth century. These roots in European Jewish socialism have been discussed within leading historical accounts of the ILGWU. I will provide some discussion of these origins here, in order to establish the historical and ideological context for the later literary analysis. In the semi-official history *Look for the Union Label – A History of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union* (1995) Gus Tyler, who himself served as Assistant President of the union between 1945 until 1989, highlights that the union's emphasis on education was rooted in its Jewish socialist heritage. Tyler writes, "In this community, composed of the "People of the Book," the learned man and learning per se were highly praised" (Tyler 15). Although he was not himself from a

Jewish background, Tyler attributed the origins of the union's educational policy to its foundation in Jewish socialism, arguing that, "One of the first resolves of the garment workers union when it came into being was to set up an education department to "educate" its members. That education reflected the multifaceted, cultural life of the Jewish immigrant milieu" (Tyler 15).

The origins of the union's commitment to education were in no small part derived from the formative experiences of the four Jewish women who were most active and influential within the organised labour movement in the early twentieth century. These four women were Pauline Newman, Fannia Cohn, Rose Schneiderman, and Clara Lemlich. Each of these women emigrated to the United States from Eastern Europe at an early age, and all four became active in the organisation of the garment industry, in particular with the ILGWU. Annelise Orleck begins her study of the lives and political activity of these four women, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (1995), by establishing the significance of these women's lives in relation to U.S. political history. She writes that each of these women "came of age amid the women's labor uprisings of the early 1900s and remained active through the 1960s. All four rose from the garment shop floor to positions of influence in the American labor movement" (Orleck 2). In particular, the shared origins of these women bore a significant impact on the cultural roots of American female radicalism in the early twentieth century. Gender issues played an important role in the formative experiences of these four women and informed their subsequent commitment to education within the labour movement. Orleck draws a vivid picture of how their experience growing up in Jewish communities of Eastern Europe determined their subsequent devotion to education. Orleck argues that, although "Eastern European Jewish tradition glorified strong, economically sophisticated wives and mothers," "a far higher premium was placed on study and prayer" – an area reserved for men (19). As Orleck continues, "many Jewish women immigrants would describe a lingering sense of deprivation and desire for the education lavished on their brothers" (19). Orleck paints a clear picture of restrictive circumstances in which many Jewish parents "feared that once their daughters were exposed to a broader world they would be unable to control them" (20). For example, when Clara Lemlich's father "found a cache of her books hidden beneath a meat pan in the kitchen, he burned the whole lot" (Orleck 21). Having had to fight hard for what little education they had received, therefore, is "what

differentiated them – and would continue to set them apart from their counterparts in the Jewish immigrant labor movement in the United States” (Orleck 19).

For European Jewish women, emigration to the United States held the promise of expanded educational opportunities in the form of free public schooling. However, the economic circumstances which these young women faced on arrival in the States harshly curtailed the scope of these opportunities. As Orleck argues, “Having to drop out of school to work was more than a disappointment for many Jewish immigrant girls; it was their first great disillusionment with the dream of America. And they did not give that dream up easily” (Orleck 39). These women wanted more than to be the drudges of industrial capitalism. The commitment which Newman, Cohn, Schneiderman and Lemlich held toward education was driven by the same impetus as lay behind their involvement in political struggle. In Newman’s words, they were driven by the need to ensure that “poverty did not deprive us from finding joy and satisfaction in things of the spirit” (qtd. in Orleck 16). Having struggled to attain education during their childhoods in Eastern Europe, Newman, Cohn, Schneiderman and Lemlich shared a common vision of education as a means toward the realisation of a fuller humanity and, as Orleck concludes, “it focused them on a single goal: to reshape U.S. society so that “working girls” like themselves could fulfil some of their dreams” (16). As a union composed of a distinctly high proportion of female members, the ILGWU provided a forum in which the aspirations of working women could be addressed. According to Alice Henry’s 1923 study *Women in the Labor Movement*, “The International Ladies’ Garment Workers have 90 locals with a membership of over 100,000, of whom about 50 per cent are women workers” (65). Education, as I will go on to show, played an important factor in the success of organising female garment workers.

Mark Starr, who replaced Fannia Cohn as Educational Director of the International in 1935, similarly emphasised the roots of the union’s educational programme in European socialism in his speech, “Why Union Education? Aims, History, and Philosophy of the Educational Work of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union” (1948). Starr, a British man and the son of a Methodist minister, came from a very different cultural and intellectual background from Cohn, who was a Russian Jewish immigrant (Lewis). Although, according to Orleck, Cohn felt side-lined and bitterly resented the appointment of the younger man, she nevertheless “cut her losses and continued designing worker’s education programs that reflected her vision”



(Orleck 196). While Starr had personal and ideological differences from his Jewish predecessor, the narrative of union history which he develops in this 1947 speech shares Tyler's understanding that the ILGWU's early emphasis on education was derived from its origins in European socialism, although he neglects the issue of Jewish identity. He argues that garment workers of the early twentieth century, "looked upon education as the road to a fuller life." ("Why Union Education" 197). Furthermore, he continues, these immigrants "brought their devotion to socialist educational clubs over from Europe. Now, they naturally transferred the spirit of these clubs, which featured informal debates, forums, and public meetings on social, political and economic questions to their union halls" ("Why Union Education" 196). In this respect, the ILGWU provided not just a vehicle for the organisation of garment workers, but an institutional framework in which the type of collective cultural activities previously enjoyed in Europe, could be re-developed within an American context. In this respect, developing educational programmes from within the context of the largely Jewish union could also have been one way of reconciling the young immigrant's thirst to learn with the older traditions of scholarship and learning inherited from the Old World. Education, therefore, could be a means of bridging the chasm experienced by those young immigrants whom Anzia Yezierska described as "children of loneliness, wandering between worlds that are at once too old and too new to live in" (Yezierska 123).

The first fully developed union educational program in the United States was developed by the ILGWU in 1915, initiated at New York's Local 25 by Cohn, Schneiderman, Newman, and the former history teacher Juliet Poyntz. Local 25 ran classes in history, politics, physical fitness and art, and also organised concerts, plays, and discussion groups. These activities were conducted inside large public school buildings, borrowed for these purposes, known as "Unity Centres." According to the "Report of Educational Activities: 1922-1924" issued by the International, members would meet at the Unity Centres "from four to five nights a week" indicating the extent of their appeal ("Report" 361). Having proved successful, as Alice Kessler-Harris notes, "other women's locals in Philadelphia and Chicago followed the example of local 25" and established their own centres (65). The local also purchased a large country house in upstate New York for the purposes of allowing members to vacation together. Tyler presents a romantic vision of this vacation centre in his historical account of the

union's educational activity, reflecting on a scene in which young women "took their bloomers and their books to the Catskills to enjoy one another's company, the fresh air, and the thoughts of great thinkers" (Tyler 198). The Local's educational program proved highly popular among its members. As Orleck notes, "By 1919, just four years after its founding, Local 25's Education Department reported that ten thousand students, mostly young immigrant women, were enrolled in classes. Union-sponsored lectures, concerts and plays attracted another seven thousand" (Orleck 176). The fact that educational lectures were conducted in these centres alongside concerts and plays demonstrates the way in which educational leaders and union members viewed shared educational activities in holistic terms as a means of cultivating a greater sense of solidarity among young female wage-earners. As Pauline Newman argued, the success of organising young women workers hinged on the union's ability to appeal to their "human desire for empathy and sociability" (Orleck 176). The appeal of educational programs to young women was one way of integrating them into a labour movement from which they had been dissociated as a consequence of traditional social roles, limited labour-force opportunities, and the resistance of male-dominated union leadership to organising women workers. As Alice Henry said of an earlier generation of young female workers, they "often did not realize that young women were within the scope of the labor movement" (37). The educational activities offered by Local 25 were designed to fire women's imagination and motivate them with a newfound vision of what they could collectively achieve.

However, the educational program offered by Local 25 became a victim of its own success. Having spurred the idealism and political commitment of its members, the young women of Local 25 agitated for a shop-delegate system. Proposed in 1919, the shop delegate system would have given women workers greater representation, by allowing women representatives from the shop floor to hold office and serve as representatives to the union's General Executive Board (Kessler-Harris 65). The proposed shop-delegate system would have redressed the gender bias of the existing system, in which shops were represented by local officers, who were predominantly male (Kessler-Harris 65). As Kessler-Harris notes, the shop-delegate system "threatened the international's General Executive Board, whose sole female member – Fannia Cohn – retreated under the attack" (65). Shortly afterwards, the shop delegates organised into leagues which had been infiltrated by members of the Communist Party.

Kessler-Harris notes that this provided “added incentive to the male leadership’s decision to break them up” (65). In 1920, Local 25 was split into three locals and placed under the administration of the largely male cloakmakers’ union. As a result, the issue of greater female representation at the union’s national leadership level became subsumed by political infighting between communist and non-communist organisers. The fact that communist infiltration provided a cover for the male leadership’s decision to stem the tide of greater female influence at the national level of organisation has only recently been noted by feminist labour historians such as Orleck and Kessler-Harris. In *Look for the Union Label*, in contrast, Tyler attributes the decision to break up the shop-delegate leagues entirely to the perceived Communist threat embodied in this system, arguing that “As in Czarist Russia, so too in the International, the Communists were putting together their parallel structure” (45). Despite this, the educational policies pioneered in Local 25 paved the way for the development of a central educational policy within the ILGWU.

Indeed, the ILGWU had developed a union-wide educational department in 1916. As Tyler recounts, a convention of the International held in Philadelphia voted to establish an Education department; Juliet Poyntz was named as director, and Cohn was “charged with getting the locals to name their own directors and to involve the rank and file” (199). In 1918 Poyntz left, and was replaced by Cohn. Cohn served as Educational Director between 1918 and 1935 when, as mentioned earlier, she was replaced in that position by Mark Starr. After this, however, she continued to serve in the position of Educational Secretary, retiring only in 1962 (Orleck 170). As Tyler notes, Cohn achieved legendary status within the union’s history and her name became “synonymous with worker education both inside and outside the ILGWU” (200). On assuming the position of executive secretary of the International’s Education Department in 1916, Cohn initiated one of the most ambitious and wide-ranging education programs in the United States. Having emigrated to New York in 1904, Cohn had joined the Socialist Party and devoted her attention to the improvement of workers’ education. She was one of the founders of Brookwood Labor College, a residential educational centre for workers based north of New York City, and was active in the Rand School for Social Science and in the Pioneer Youth Camps sponsored by the Socialist Party. As Katz comments, Cohn was also “strongly influenced by trade-union feminists with whom she worked to build the Women’s Trade Union League” (7). The

emphasis which Cohn placed on the role of workers' education within the labour movement was indeed similar to that of Margaret Dreier Robins, who served as President of the WTUL between 1907 until 1922. However, the contrast in the social and cultural backgrounds of Robins and Cohn sheds light on how the ILGWU's policy toward education related to issues of class and national identity more broadly. Founded in 1903, the WTUL was an organisation which brought middle-class and working-class women together to lead the drive to organise the female labour force, secure protective legislation for women, and educate the public to the needs of working women. Coming from a middle-class Protestant background, Robins' presidency of the WTUL symbolized what Elizabeth Payne describes as "the new bonds of commitment among women, an expression of solidarity and sorority that carried with it hopes for female workers as well as for society at large" (4). The success of Robins' leadership lay in her ability to link Progressive values to a commitment to feminist reform. Indeed, feminism was at the heart of Robin's Progressivist vision, in which the reform of society was inextricably linked to the reform of the individual, and in particular to the reform of the individual woman as the custodian of the coming generation.

In this respect, as Linda Kerber and Jane Sherron De Hart argue, Robins drew on the tradition of "Republican Mothers" that stretched back to the early years of the republic, in which women "assumed a role that made their domestic domain of education and nurture into a schoolroom for the next generation of virtuous citizens," and which in the late nineteenth century developed into a progressive vision of "Reformist Motherhood" (229). In line with this ideology, Robins viewed education as the key to transform the individual worker into an active citizen, capable of participating fully in American democracy. Payne quotes Robins' assertion that "the greatest value of the trade union movement is that it calls forth personality. It does this primarily by placing responsibility upon the worker in factory and shops" (qtd. in Payne 81). As Payne argues, Robins' commitment to trade union organisation was rooted in her belief that the educational and cultural opportunities afforded by unionism "created the possibility of a new 'citizenship idea of labour'" (81). The morality of this political concept was inextricable from its roots in middle-class Protestantism. This tradition, Payne writes, "assumed that citizenship was an inalienable right, one that morally obliged the individual to safeguard the public good" (167). In this respect, the

educational policy of the WTUL could be described as having the function of teaching workers to adopt the ideological and political views of Robins herself.

Robins' emphasis on a reformist feminist vision necessarily constrained the WTUL's attentiveness to the class concerns which were at the heart of the largely Jewish ILGWU. Female Jewish ILGWU organisers such as Pauline Newman went to the WTUL in search of valuable financial and political support from middle-class allies, yet felt restricted by the union's adherence to the reformist vision articulated by Robins. As Kessler-Harris argues, Jewish women involved in the labour movement had to accept that "the financial and moral support of the WTUL came at a price" (44). Outlining the fundamental difference in ideological emphasis which characterised the inter-relationship of the two unions, Kessler-Harris writes, "Jewish women had been nurtured in the cradle of socialism, and for them, alliances with other women were largely ways of achieving a more just society" (44). In contrast, the middle-class women of the WTUL "held that political, social, and biological oppression of women was the major problem. They saw labor organization among women as a way of transcending class lines in the service of feminist interests" (Kessler-Harris 44). Newman, in her dealings with the WTUL, criticised the prescriptiveness of the middle-class ideology which the WTUL fostered among its members. Kessler-Harris notes that, in a letter to fellow organiser Rose Schneiderman, Newman complains that Robins "has made all the girls of the league think her way and as a consequence they do not use their own mind and do not act the way they feel but the way Mrs. R. wants them to" (Kessler-Harris 46). If, as union leader Abraham Bisno remarked, through their increased entry into the labour market young women "acquired the right to a personality," then Robin's had succeeded in co-opting this personality into her own political terms (qtd. in Foner 591)

The ideas of "reformist feminism" and the "citizenship of labor" espoused by Robins were clearly assimilationist. With its ideological roots in middle-class Protestantism, it stood in marked contrast to the "industrial feminist" vision of Cohn, Schneiderman, Lemlich and Newman. As Orleck notes, the phrase "industrial feminism" was "coined in 1915 by scholar Mildred Moore" to describe working women's militancy (54). The phrase "industrial feminism" expresses not a coherent political movement, but a vision of radical transformation forged from the sweat and labour of the shop floor. Orleck quotes Socialist party activist Theresa Malkiel as

saying that working-class women were driven to demand greater political and workplace recognition by “an eruption of a long smouldering volcano, an overflow of suffering, abuse and exhaustion” (qtd. in Orleck 55). This “eruption” of working-class female activism engendered a heated, radical vision of political change that stood in marked contrast to the cool-headed, assimilative Progressivism of Robins and the WTUL. This coercive aspect of Robins’ political vision is apparent in the title of a pamphlet published by the WTUL in 1912, entitled “New World Lessons for Old World Peoples” (Payne 85). Moreover, the WTUL ran classes in English language for its members, with a view not only to improve their communicative abilities within the industrial labour market, but also to instruct them in the language viewed by middle-class reformers as *the* language of civic society. Payne notes one WTUL member as complaining that within the union, “we have a large constituency who cannot read English, who have not learned to think” (85). Although the ILGWU likewise ran courses of instruction in English, the underlying assimilationist commitment to a notion of an American civic identity present in the WTUL was not shared. The ILGWU’s bi-monthly newspaper was published in Yiddish, Italian and Spanish in addition to English, as well as French edition for members in Montreal (“Why Union Education” 199). Also, different locals within the ILGWU were encouraged to provide activities suited to their respective ethnic constituencies; for example, Mandolin clubs were established to cater for the large number of Italian workers who entered the garment industry in the early decades of the twentieth century. The comparison between the educational visions present within the WTUL and the ILGWU throws into relief the ideology underpinning the early development of the ILGWU’s educational policy. More broadly, the unease which working-class organisers such as Newman experienced in their dealings with the WTUL were symptomatic of wider social tensions of the Progressive era, in which a working-class vision of revolutionary political change was increasingly appropriated by and translated into the terms of a middle-class, reformist political discourse.

The disparity between the pedagogical aims of the two organisations was undergirded by an ideological difference regarding the end towards which each aimed its educational policy. As Payne notes, Robins viewed unions as “a means of educating women, teaching them to think and grow while developing self-government, self-respect and self-reliance” (58). In contrast, especially in the period before the First

World War, the ILGWU provided an environment in which social and educational activities fostered a sense of collectivism and solidarity. In this respect, what ILGWU leaders referred to as “spirit” was a key factor in the success of the organisation of women workers in the pre-war period. The “Uprising of the Twenty Thousand” of 1909, in which between 20,000 to 40,000 mostly female young garment workers in New York struck for better wages and working conditions had proved a defining moment in terms of women’s engagement with the organised labour movement. Clara Lemlich stated to one journalist that the Uprising had given the young female workers “a new understanding of their relation to each other,” in arguing that the strike was a crucible which galvanized “a new integrated class and gender consciousness among U.S. working women” (qtd. in Orleck 53). Recognising that this issue of “spirit” had been a crucial factor in the success of the strike, Schneiderman proclaimed famously in the aftermath that “The working woman needs bread, but she needs roses, too” (qtd. in Orleck 57).

Whereas bread-and-butter issues of wages and working-conditions appealed strongly to men, the strike of 1909 was a catalyst which placed the issue of culture at the foreground of the organisation of women within the garment industry. As Fannia Cohn stated bluntly, “I do not see how we can get girls to sacrifice themselves unless we discuss something besides trade matters.... There must be something more than the economic question, there must be idealism” (qtd. in Kessler-Harris 59). ILGWU organisers fostered this sense of “*communitas*” by organising a range of social, recreational and educational activities. Cohn imparted to the ILGWU her commitment to education as the means by which young women would come together and acquire a powerful knowledge and experience of both personal fulfilment and class solidarity. Indeed, as Daniel Katz has shown, gender played a significant role in the way in which women and men understood their relationship to the union and informed their experiences of the educational activities on offer. In an interview with Katz, the African-American sewing-machine operator, Maida Springer, remembered that “some older men resisted the social forms of organizing promoted by local unions” (qtd. in Katz 13). Springer recollects that some men would question rhetorically, “We organised the union by *dancing*?” clearly questioning the extent of the union’s investment in cultural activities (qtd. in Katz 13). Springer surmised that “women more than men probably saw the social aspect of union work as intricately tied to the

organizing, political, and economic work of the union” (qtd. in Katz 13). As a female presence within the General Executive Board, and through her active position within the leadership of the International’s Education Department, Cohn kept the issue of workers’ education at the heart of the ILGWU for more than four decades, despite the continued ambivalence of a largely male leadership.

Cohn’s vision of the role of education was also strongly influenced by the Columbia University historian Charles Beard. Tyler argues that Cohn was influenced by Beard’s idealistic vision of unionism as the “new frontier for democracy in America” (Tyler 200). Education was at the forefront of this vision, as workers would need to be educated not only in order to deal with a complex range of workplace organisation issues, but also to meet the demands of an enriched social existence. Writing during the interwar period, Beard’s thought on the role of education in society was influenced by the emphasis on human psychology within contemporary political science literature. As Bernard Borning notes, “With the advent of the postwar period, increasing references to psychological data began to occur in political science literature” (64). Beard’s views were similar to that of the behaviourist psychologist John B. Watson, whose work *Psychology from the Standpoint of a Behaviorist* had been published in 1919. Borning argues that both Beard and Watson shared the belief that “how people actually behave is a much more reliable way of testing assumptions about human behavior than reliance on introspective evidence” (65). Founded on this empirical basis, Beard’s political thought accounted for the perennial irrationalism and incompetency of man and emphasised the role of human weakness in influencing the course of historical events. For example, in the article “Democracy Holds Its Ground: A European Survey” (1928), Beard argues that “War and revolution made a republic, not a solemn vote of the people” (qtd. in Borning 67). Acknowledging the role of human fallibility in shaping the course of historical events, Beard viewed education as the means by which man could achieve ever greater mastery over his own destiny. In *The Economic Basis of Politics* (1922), for example, Beard queries whether mankind may not, “by taking thought, lift himself above the social conflicts that destroy civilizations and make himself master of his social destiny?” (qtd. in Borning 72). While recognising the fundamental imperfectability of man, Beard’s vision suggested that educational programs within the organised labour movement could provide the means by which workers were able to gain greater knowledge of their own lives, and their place within



broader social relations. Beard became a lifelong friend of Cohn, and “considered her an educational pioneer” (Orleck 173). The educational programs established by Cohn aimed to provide a practical enactment of Beard’s educational theory.

In her article “The Role of Worker’s Education in the Labor Movement” printed in the June 30, 1922 edition of *Justice*, Cohn places workers’ education firmly at the centre of her vision of revolutionary political change. Describing radical political transformation in the United States as imminent and the organized labour movement as the natural agent to direct the forces of social change, Cohn argues that “the first essential thing to the accomplishment of this change is that the group that is to play the most important part be prepared morally and intellectually for this historic mission” (“Role of Worker’s Education” 346). Posing the rhetorical question, “Are the workers, through their unions, prepared to assume this great historical mission?” Cohn presents the answer as “the movement for workers’ education within the trade unions of our country” (“Role of Worker’s Education” 347). In concluding this short article, Cohn argues that the true aim of education is not to adapt the individual to the existing inequitable society, but “rather to adjust the environment to the needs of modern life” (“Role of Worker’s Education” 347). Education, therefore, was seen by Cohn as a key instrument of social change which was to be placed at the heart of labour organisation in America.

Although the ILGWU was a pioneer of workers’ education, the idealistic vision of the role of education expressed here by Cohn was also articulated throughout a range of contemporary labour literature focussing on workers’ education. For example, in an address entitled “The Promise of Worker’s Education,” delivered by Spencer Miller Jr., Secretary of the Worker’s Education Bureau of America, argues, “Labor requires not a fuller pay envelope, but fuller opportunities. Labor seeks not a living, but a life. But these aims are, I assert, the high aims of education and correspond to human aspiration whenever it is nobly expressed” (Miller 352). Similarly, the “Report of Educational Activities, 1922-1924,” produced by the International, paints an idealised picture of union life, in which the members “dream of a world where economic and social justice shall prevail, where the welfare of mankind will be the aim of all activity, where society will be organized as a cooperative commonwealth, where love, friendship and fellowship will replace selfishness” (“Report” 360). The ILGWU emphasised that education was to play a pivotal role in the establishment of this cooperative

commonwealth, the report stating that workers' classes must "be selected with the definite object of giving our members the mental and moral equipment which will best enable them to be useful not only to their own union, but also to the Labor movement and society as a whole" ("Report" 360). In this context, education was to emerge as a natural development in the maturation of the labour movement, or as Spencer Miller puts it, "Worker's Education was an expression of the cultural and humanistic purposes of the labour movement – the outward manifestation of an inner impulse" (Miller 352). Echoing this tacitly Lamarckian rhetoric, in which workers' education manifests itself as a symptomatic response to the growing requirements of the proletarian body politic, Starr states firmly in "Why Union Education?" that "The ILGWU believes that today the pursuit of happiness depends more than ever on wiping out social illiteracy and attaining civic and political maturity" ("Why Union Education" 201).

The conflation in the statements of both Miller and Starr between the political and physical maturity of the proletarian body politic resonates with the rhetoric adopted in discussion regarding the role of the arts in the American Communist movement of the 1930s, as I discussed earlier in relation to the work of Genevieve Taggard. As I argued previously, a range of writers associated with the Communist *New Masses* during the 1930s used this rhetorical trope as a shorthand expression of the theoretical view that the proletariat exists as the subjective embodiment of an objective historical movement. Writers such as Waldo Frank then drew on this trope in arguing that the task of the writer was to shape the "conscious culture" of the working-class as the agent of political change. Just as debate among the Communist Left of the Depression-Era centred on the role of the arts in developing collective class-consciousness, so the organised labour movement of this period focussed on educational and cultural activities as the means by which the working-class could achieve greater political agency. Starr's phrase "social illiteracy" is revealing in this respect, as it conveys an idea of the existing social order as a text which can be made subject to the ever greater mastery of the working class, echoing Beard's understanding of education as the means by which the fallibility of man's control over his own destiny can be surmounted. Starr rejected what he perceived as Cohn's view of education as informed by the "romantic concept of the Worker as the Redeemer of Society," instead promising to use the Education Department as a means to mold "a well disciplined body of men and women" who understood that "what is good for the union is good for the members" (qtd. in

Orleck 197). However, both Cohn and Starr share an idealistic vision in which education is seen as the natural outgrowth or expression of the human progress achieved by workers through the development of the organised labour movement. As is indicated by Starr's suggestive phrase, literature occupied a central position within the union's educational activities, as poetry, drama and song could be used as tools for both raising class consciousness and fostering union solidarity, allowing ILGWU members to more competently interpret the circumstances of their own existence. Ultimately, the historical and political factors which I have discussed led to education occupying a central position within the culture of the ILGWU. What role specifically, though, did literature play within the overall scheme of the union's educational activity and how did it relate to the union ideology surrounding workers' education?

### **3.3 “Builders of a New Culture”: The Role of Literature within the ILGWU's Educational Department**

Having provided an outline and discussion of the historical circumstances and political factors which shaped the development of the ILGWU's Educational Department, I now turn to focus more directly on the role of literature and literary activities within the department. I provide a description of some of the activities on offer to union members, and also discuss some examples of articles printed in *Justice* which elaborate on the role of literature within ILGWU culture. It is worth pausing, here, to remember that the specific task of collecting and interpreting the literature of labour unions has only just begun. Where the role of cultural production within the ILGWU has been discussed, it has focussed on the union's dramatic output, for example in Michael Denning's discussion of the highly successful musical revue *Pins and Needles* in *The Cultural Front* (1996). The fact that poetic production within the organised labour movement has been neglected is remarkable, given the energy and resources which the labour movement devoted to the production and dissemination of literature in the early to mid-twentieth century. As John Marsh argues, “Throughout the 1930s, but especially in the latter half of that decade, hundreds, easily thousands of workers ... would write poems and see them printed in their AFL, CIO and unaffiliated union newspapers” (*You Work Tomorrow* 5). However, while the overall task of recovering the poetry of the labour movement needs to be broad and sustained, I agree with Marsh's assessment that we can better understand the cultural work of labour poetry by attending to the “specific role which poetry played” within a given labour

union (“Auto Writers”). Focussing specifically on the role of poetry is justified in terms of the unique extent to which the study of labour poetry has been side-lined, even within the recovery work produced by scholars such as Cary Nelson and Barbara Foley during the 80s and 90s. In this section, then, I will provide an initial description and analysis of the role of literary activity within the ILGWU.

The following information about the literary activities provided by the ILGWU is mostly gleaned from the pages of the union’s bi-monthly newspaper, *Justice*. Although individual locals also printed their own newspapers, *Justice* provides the best source of information about nation-wide ILGWU activities. Throughout the 30s and 40s, *Justice* contained a double-page spread devoted to the activities of the Educational Department, and the newspaper also featured items outlining notable cultural activities of various locals. The information is gathered from issues of *Justice* printed between 1939 and 1946, which I consulted specifically in order to collect the work of poet Miriam Tane, whose work was published during this period. The literary activities which I will discuss here, then, provide a further understanding of the union context in which the work would have been received. I will go on to argue in a later chapter that Tane’s lyric poetry is unique in the extent to which it lays bare the social and material terms of its own act of cultural production. Outlining some of the union’s educational activities, therefore, will allow for a greater understanding of the literary culture within which Tane’s critique was operating.

From 1921 onwards, the ILGWU operated a Book Division. According to the “Report of Educational Activities, 1922-1924”, the initial activities of the Book Division included preparing “a list of books valuable to our members” and the department “also assisted several of our organisations [locals] to purchase libraries at reasonable cost” (“Report” 365). The book division purchased books from publishers at wholesale prices, enabling locals to meet the cost of providing their members with books. The book division also had a somewhat didactic function, in that it provided suggestions and made lists available to union members as to the types of books that they might like to read. *Justice* regularly printed a small column entitled “What to Read,” which provided readers with some ideas. For example, the “What to Read” column of the August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1945 edition of *Justice* proudly proclaims that, “The Book Division keeps growing. It makes good reading matter available to ILGWU members by aiding them in the selection of titles and in cutting down the cost of purchasing books” (“What

to Read” 10). Furthermore, the article states that “Frequently revised lists of desirable books are available to union members on request. Those unable to buy books may secure them at their local libraries” (“What to Read” 10).

Libraries played an important part within the culture of each ILGWU local. A range of articles printed in *Justice* celebrate the role of libraries within the Educational Department. For example, the December 1, 1939 edition of *Justice* contains a feature on the popularity of Local 22’s library. A photograph of the library is printed, above which reads the headline “Library Wins Popularity Contest” (“Library Wins Popularity Contest” 6). Below the photograph, there is a caption which reads, “That Local 22 Library Is Proving so Popular That They’ll Soon Have to Hire Authors to Write New Books. The Demand is Terrific” (“Library Wins Popularity Contest” 6). The ILGWU sought to answer the demand that it generated, producing its own literary material including the poetry and songbooks which I will discuss shortly. Local 22, for example, produced two editions of *Labor Stuff*, which, according to the September 1, 1939 edition of *Justice* was a collection of “poetry, short stories, essays and articles on union activities” (“Labor Stuff” 5). While producing literary material which helped meet the demand of their own libraries, the ILGWU did not restrict its intended audience to only its own members, instead aiming at the labour movement more broadly. The article promoting “Labor Stuff,” for example, mentions the reception which the collection has had within the wider labour press, commenting favourably that ““The Timber Worker” hailed it as ‘a distinct achievement in labour union education’, and “The Shipyard Worker” commented, ‘It shows what the garment worker girls can do’” (“Labor Stuff” 5). The ILGWU also sought to publicise their literary activity to a wider audience by hosting readings and visits of famed international authors. For example, the ILGWU received visits from the Nobel Prize-winning authors Thomas Mann in May, 1942 and from Pearl Buck in November 1942. Coming in 1942, these visits raised the profile of the ILGWU’s educational department at a time when it was celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its foundation. On visiting the “ILGWU division at the Los Angeles Sanatorium,” Mann praised the “progressive viewpoint of unions like the ILGWU, which played such a large part in community life” (“Famous Author Visits” 6). Although almost entirely overlooked today, socially engaged writers of the time such as Mann and Buck recognised and helped publicise the important cultural function which unions could play within working-class communities, and thus to society at large.

While the ILGWU's literary ambitions extended into the wider labour movement, the local libraries played a significant and celebrated role in the literary and educational culture that operated within the union itself. Reflecting the union's desire to accommodate its ethnically varied membership, the libraries held titles in a range of languages. According to an article in the Dec 1, 1939 edition of *Justice*, the Local 22 library had a magazine rack which contained "the current issues of popular magazines and daily periodicals in English and Yiddish" ("Local 22 Library" 6). The article also states that "Books in English and Yiddish are now on the shelves. Works in Russian and Spanish will be added in the near future" (6). Furthermore, according to the April 1, 1939 edition of *Justice*, the library which the ILGWU established for a collection of locals in Chicago contained titles in "Italian, German, Polish, Greek, and other languages" ("Books in Chicago" 13). Indicating the importance placed on libraries within the union, the opening of a library branch at a local in Los Angeles was treated with great aplomb. Among a series of articles printed in 1942 to celebrate the "Quarter Century Mark" of ILGWU's Educational Department, the June 15, 1942 edition of *Justice* featured a photo and accompanying caption celebrating the opening of the first Los Angeles library, demonstrating the significance accorded such an event ("Library Branch in L.A. Unions" 13). An accompanying article discussing the role of the libraries within the union more broadly shows the way in which literary initiatives begun at the union's national level engendered supplementary activities at the local level. For example, the article states that "To supplement the official journals, "Justice," "Giustizia," "Justicia," and "Gerechtigkeit," there are now 30 local ILGWU papers, some printed and some model examples of mimeographic art" ("Quarter Century Mark" 13). Libraries clearly played an important function in the dissemination of literary material, and in making available to union members a space in which they would have a chance to come together and enjoy it. According to the section on "Libraries" in the "Quarter Century Mark" article, by 1942 "39 locals maintain live libraries ranging from extensive collections in seven languages with a full-time librarian ... to a single case of current books or a "deposit" collection from the public library" ("Quarter Century Mark" 13). A similar article from the April 1, 1939 edition shows that the leadership also understood and exploited the pedagogical function of libraries. The article, headlined "Books in Chicago" begins by stating that Chicago locals "use the library as an educational tool" ("Books in Chicago" 13). The library also provided a forum in which educational officials could engage with members and encourage them to

participate in the union's wider educational program. The article describes the process, whereby "Through our library, we have been able to reach a good section of our membership. When they come in for books, we can talk to them about other activities in our educational program" (13). During the Second World War, libraries provided a space for members to escape the worries and uncertainty of their everyday existence. An article entitled "Escapists Happy at Union Library" from the July 15, 1940 edition of *Justice* states that "The tragic turn of European events has caused a small boom in the number of mystery stories and other works of fiction withdrawn by dressmakers from the Local 22 library" ("Escapists Happy" 7). Quantifying this escapist drive, the article reports that "the turnover of mystery stories is more than 100 per cent higher since Marshal Petain capitulated to Adolf Hitler" (7). Overall, then, libraries had an important role in the ILGWU's education work, by encouraging reading and the production of literary material among its members, through the dissemination of material in several languages, and in providing a forum in which members could engage not only with each other, but also with Educational Officers responsible for the organisation and running of wider educational activities. However, the provision of local libraries was just one facet of The Book Division's activity.

In addition to making books available at low cost to local libraries, the ILGWU's Book Division promoted literary material which the union felt would be desirable and useful to its readers. In this capacity, the Book Division promoted literary works alongside material pertaining to issues of labour organisation and socio-political problems. For example, the brief list included under the headline "Have You Read?" in the August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1940 edition of *Justice* includes the titles "Training for Union Service," "Labor and Consumer Education," and "Trends and Prospects in the Garment Industry" ("Have You Read?" 12). This list also suggests the self-referential nature of some of the literary material produced by the union. The inclusion of the title "Workers' Education, 1937-1939" shows that workers were being asked to reflect on the nature of their educational experience, even as they participated in it ("Have You Read?" 12). The one-line postscript to this "Have You Read" article also makes clear that the content of these reading lists was influenced by contemporary events, in its simple statement that "WRONG IDEAS are more deadly than poison gas" (12). As part of its overall educational program, the literary activities provided by the ILGWU were designed with the idea of "fun" at least partly in mind, as the union wanted to recruit and foster a sense

of community among its young, largely female labour force. However, if wrong ideas were poisonous, then this statement also implies that the union exhibited an understanding that literature could provide at least one means of imparting an intellectual cure. Clearly, the reading lists provided by the Book Division and the "What to Read" columns printed frequently in *Justice* manifested a certain level of didactic intent. Conversely, however, the value which a reading list would have to a time-starved garment worker seeking out literary entertainment could also be easily understated.

In addition to the "What to Read" column, each edition of *Justice* printed within the period considered featured a book review column, "On the Book Front," written by Miriam Spicehandler. Like Miriam Tane, Miriam Spicehandler was a member of New York's Local 22. In the early years of the New Deal, the ILGWU experienced an explosive growth in numbers, as ethnic groups, who had increasingly entered into the garment industry in recent years, including African Americans and Puerto Ricans, were welcomed into the organised labour movement. As Daniel Katz argues, in order to "attract and retain these new members," the ILGWU expanded its "array of educational, social, recreational and cultural activities" (6). Furthermore, Local 22 was "at the vanguard of this effort," featuring one of the ILGWU's most extensive local educational programs (6). The range and focus of Local 22's educational program became narrowed after 1937, in which year Lewis Corey replaced Will Herberg as the local's Educational Director, and sought to reaffirm the distinction between "what is of value to the individual alone and what is of value to the individual *and the union*" (Katz 6). Despite

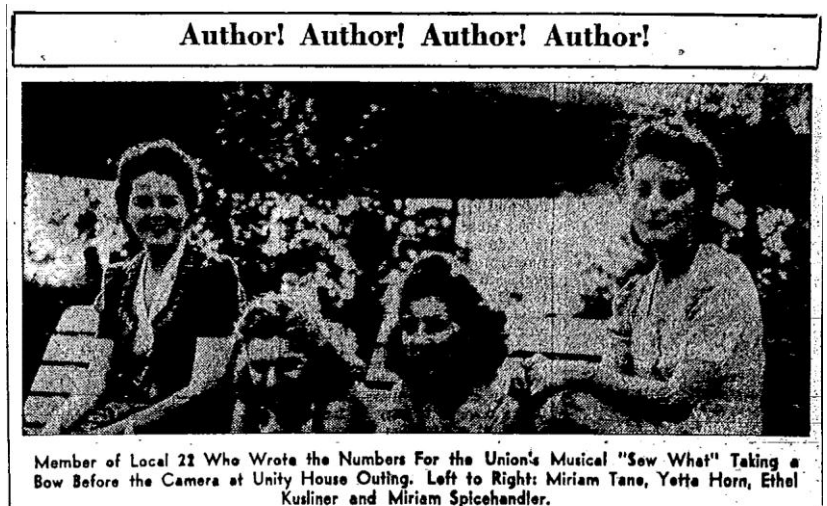


Figure 7 - "Author! Author!" *Justice*. 1 Sept., 1939. Print.

this, the output of both Tane and Spicehandler after 1937 and the burgeoning success of the local's library, as mentioned above, is indicative of the continued importance of literary activity to local educational programs, even after local 22 and the ILGWU as a



whole shifted the emphasis of their policy toward education away from the politically idealist vision of Fannia Cohn, toward the more pragmatic views held by the male leadership, including Mark Starr. Literary activity continued to occupy an important place within Local 22's educational program. For example, Tane and Spicehandler worked together writing sketch material for the musical revue "Sew What." Indeed, Tane and Spicehandler were photographed together for a promotional piece on "Sew What" printed in the September 1, 1939 edition of *Justice* (Figure 7).

Spicehandler reviewed a wide range of material for her column; every genre from history to psychology to literature was included. Like the "Have You Read?" column mentioned above, the subject of Spicehandler's reviews reflect the times in which they were written, with a range of titles dealing with war and the military being reviewed after America's entry into the Second World War. For example, the January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1942 edition of *Justice* features a review of *Economic Consequences of the Second World War* by Lewis L. Lorwin ("Economic Consequences" 9). Although many of the titles reviewed are completely unknown today, a few recognisable authors were the subject of Spicehandler's reviews, including John Dos Passos, Pearl Buck, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Ernest Hemingway and Upton Sinclair. While during the 30s and 40s debate raged among the Communist literary scene as to the role of modernist experimentation and abstraction in proletarian literature, and critics were to some extent constrained in their analysis by whichever line they elected to adhere to, Spicehandler's reviews, although clearly socialist in their outlook, are idiosyncratic and written free of any particular ideological constraint. For example, Spicehandler's review of Upton Sinclair's *World's End* (1940) is characteristically even-handed. She seeks to assess the novel's social relevance, but also offers an aesthetic evaluation of the work, discussing its merits as a work of literature. She praises Sinclair's improved ability to draw characters, arguing that "The old tendency, to sketch characters only in black and white ... has given way to use of a variety of colors in finer shadings which come closer to capturing the true springs of human behavior" ("World's End" 9). Thus, while praising the "burning candor" which Sinclair exhibits in his treatment of social themes, her strongest praise is reserved for what she regards as being his newfound recognition that "our world is too complicated to be captured in black and white alone" (9). If literature was seen to play an important role in allowing workers to interpret the circumstances of their own existence, then Spicehandler's review indicates that the

ILGWU provided a forum in which the shades of grey that coloured contemporary socio-political and economic relations were permitted to be brought into view.

Poetry was seen to occupy a key role within the moulding of a more socially literate and therefore more politically powerful working-class. An article in the March 15, 1946 edition of *Justice* entitled “Literature and Daily Life,” reports remarks made during a panel discussion on the subject organised by Fannia Cohn. The article favourably reports the comments of Dr. Hovde, President of the New School of Social Research, who argued that “planned reading should be the goal for the growth and development of the mature adult” and who praised the ILGWU and the United Automobile Workers as “important points of departure for the expansion of literature today” (“Literature and Daily Life” 13). Hovde’s opinion clearly mirrors Cohn’s vision of education as the means through which the individual worker, and the labour movement of which he is a part, will achieve intellectual maturity. Similarly, a short article “Poetry of Labor” printed in the June 15, 1939 edition of *Justice* declares that, “As builders of a new culture, we claim all the beauty that lovely words can impart” (13). Moreover, the article explicitly roots the “building” of this new culture in the heritage of workers’ poetry. Printed in the “Educational Department” section of *Justice*, the article begins by stating that “In the ILGWU educational work our literature classes attempt to introduce our members to all the best in the heritage left to us by the singers and painters and poets of our own and bygone eras” (“Poetry of Labor” 13). In this respect, worker poets who wrote material during literary classes offered by the ILGWU were encouraged to draw on a valued tradition to which they apparently still had access. This positive articulation of the way in which contemporary poetic activity within the union was seen to be grounded in an older tradition of workers’ poetry challenges the still dominant understanding within cultural histories of the labour movement which, as Marsh argues, presents the view that “the moment of song and poem composition by workers more or less passes with the nineteenth century, and the onset of modernity and the rise of mass and popular culture render the labor-song poem obsolete” (*You Work Tomorrow* 7). Published in 1939, the article also suggests that unions provided a forum in which this tradition was kept alive, even in the face of an insurgent high modernism which, from the mid-1920s onwards, came to exert influence beyond the confines of the little magazines and change the way in which the social function of poetry was understood. As Harrington argues, “poetry possessed one set of meanings within U.S.

culture in 1910 and quite another in 1940” (*Poetry and the Public* 22). The increased influence of high modernist critics and the New Critics within the American academy had the effect of distancing the meaning of poetry from the popular and social aspects with which it had been, until then, predominantly associated. Crucially, as Harrington writes, it was this “lumping of all notions of utility in opposition to aesthetic autonomy that marks the crucial rhetorical intervention of modernist critics in shaping the social form of poetry” (*Poetry and the Public* 38). The dominance of modernist and New Critical ideas of poetry’s aesthetic autonomy within the American academy from the late 1940s onwards has obfuscated scholarly insight into areas where the previously predominant understanding of poetry’s inherent social role continued to hold sway, such as schools, middlebrow literary clubs and within the organised labour movement.

Rather than confirm a break between a prior American tradition of labour-song poetry, the “Poetry of Labor” article makes clear the way in which worker poets drew consciously on this socially engaged literary heritage. In so doing, they were encouraged to disregard distinctions between “high” and “low” cultural forms in favour of recognising the cultural utility of poems written with an explicit social message. For example, having celebrated the work produced by members within union literature classes, the article concludes with two passages of verse from the Poet Laureate John Masefield and Thomas Hardy that reinforce the ILGWU’s view of the role of education within the organised labour movement. For example, the article states that Thomas Hardy, “describes the aim of the workers in education” as “Consciousness the Will informing,/ till it fashion all things fair!” (“Poetry of Labor” 13). Overall, the article makes clear the ILGWU understanding of the key role of education within the shaping of working-class consciousness, and the central position of poetry within that process. For the ILGWU, the importance of poetry lay in its ability to imaginatively express the type of world which the union itself was designed to forge. As the article states, “The poets help us to express the desires, the hates, the hopes and the ideals of the workers and compress a world of meaning into a few lines” (“Poetry of Labor” 13). For workers, poetry had the power to set forth in literature the idealised, collective world of which the labour movement itself was a developing expression. The union’s understanding of the direct, reciprocal relationship between poetry, idealism and material reality which it is a part is demonstrated succinctly in the short item “Poem Smokes” from the June 1, 1944 edition of *Justice*, which tells of how “Brother Joseph

Tobin” donated to the ILGWU \$1000 from the sales of his book of poems, and how this money was then used by the union to purchase a shipment of cigarettes to be sent to U.S. soldiers fighting overseas. A certain volume of poetry became equivalent to a certain volume of cigarettes, intended to aid the war effort. Far from adhering to the increasingly dominant academic understanding of poetry’s aesthetic autonomy, then, the ILGWU capitalised on the material understanding of poetry which their educational leaders espoused.

More generally, the self-reflexive way in which the ILGWU publicly outlined the cultural understanding that underpins its activities is an important aspect of its Educational programme. Reading through the Educational pages of *Justice*, as union members at the time would have done, one is forced constantly to reflect on the myriad ways in which the union’s culture was being built. As hundreds of issues of *Justice* demonstrate, the members of the ILGWU were made constantly aware of the processes through which the culture to which they belonged was being created, and encouraged to recognise the central role of literary activity within the building of that culture.

The building of ILGWU culture more broadly was a creative, reflexive enterprise. *Justice* regularly featured articles that not only celebrated the union’s own history, but reflected consciously on the process of that history’s construction. Articles in *Justice* make clear the extent to which the union was concerned with the historical position that it would come to occupy. For example, the August 1, 1944 edition of *Justice* contains a short article entitled “Textbook” which details recent mentions of the ILGWU within school textbooks and contemporary labour history. The article states that “The most recent high school text to refer to the ILGWU is “The American Scene: An Introduction to Sociology”” (“Textbook” 13). Focussing on the union’s educational culture, the textbook includes a photograph of “a noon-hour health talk in Rhea cotton dress shop, Milwaukee” (13). The article also comments on a discussion of the ILGWU in the monthly digest, *Labor Today*. When the ILGWU history *Tailor’s Progress* was published by the independent historian Benjamin Stolberg in 1944, the ILGWU actively promoted it to its members. The August 1, 1944 edition of *Justice* features a three-quarter page advertisement promoting Stolberg’s work, offering members a special discount of \$1.75 on the commercial purchase price of \$2.75 (*Tailor’s Progress* 14). Alongside a series of extracts from favourable reviews of this work, the main caption of the advertisement attributes the value of the work to the fact of its having been written

by an independent scholar, and not a union insider – as would be produced later in Gus Tyler's *Look for the Union Label* (1995). The caption promotes *Tailor's Progress* as a “gripping biography of the ILGWU ... our International as seen by a great author from ‘the outside looking in’ ... as dramatic and entertaining as only an independent ‘unauthorized’ story can be” (14). Indicating the Educational Department's preoccupation with its own importance within contemporary labour history, the advert suggests that the significance of the ILGWU is assured through external evaluation. However, *Justice* also celebrates internal efforts to document its history. For instance, the September 15, 1940 edition of *Justice* proudly proclaims “2000-Foot Film Mirrors ILGWU 1940 convention” (“Film Mirrors Convention” 1). The film, which covers the union's convention in May-June 1940, was “the first documentary movie of a trade union convention” and was produced by the Educational Department (“Film Mirrors Convention” 1). Later, the department would go on to produce a feature-length movie celebrating the union's history, entitled “With These Hands” (1948). According to Tyler, the film featured well-known Hollywood stars Sam Levine, Joseph Wiseman and Arlene Francis and was distributed internationally in a total of twelve languages (Tyler 203). The ILGWU's continuous reflection on the process through which its culture, and the contemporaneous process through which the history of that culture was constructed, suggests the extent to which the work of the Educational Department was carried out in recognition of the fact that the successful forging of union identity depended on how far that identity had been sufficiently imagined.

The ILGWU functioned not only as a labour union, but also as a collective cultural organisation. Crucially, the ILGWU was a union which made visible to itself and reflected upon the cultural processes on which its political success was dependent. The cultural, educational and literary activities of the ILGWU provided an instantiation and continuous re-enactment of the imagined vision of working-class culture on which they depended. More than this, however, the way in which the union consciously and continuously reflected on the means through which its own culture, and the place of literature within that culture, was being created, is an important political aspect of its Educational activity. In “Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception” (1968), Pierre Bourdieu argues that the legitimacy of the dominant political class is determined by its relationship to culture. The legitimating function is achieved through a process whereby what Bourdieu refers to as “the social conditions which render possible

aesthetic experience” are effaced by the naturalization of the discourse of art, for example in terms of the idea of “the judgment of taste” (234). The effect of this naturalization is to lend abstract and thus unquestionable authority to the dominant political class. As Bourdieu argues, silence concerning the social prerequisites for the appropriation of culture ... is a self-seeking silence because it is what makes it possible to legitimize a social privilege by pretending that it is a gift of nature” (Bourdieu 234). In this respect, it is culture which provides the bourgeoisie with the basis of its political power, “The bourgeoisie find naturally in culture as cultivated nature and culture that has become nature the only possible principle for the legitimation of their privilege” (Bourdieu 235). It is in the context of these remarks that the political import of the ILGWU’s continuous theorisation of and reflection upon its own cultural and historical role can be understood. As Bourdieu puts it, “To remember that culture is not what one is but what one has, or rather, what one has become; to remember the social conditions that render possible aesthetic experience ... is to bring to light the hidden force of the effects of the majority of culture’s social uses” (234-235).

In recognising themselves as “builders of a new culture,” members of the ILGWU were encouraged to reflect on both the ideological and practical processes through which this building-work was achieved, by attending classes on union history and literary discussion groups, reading union histories, watching dramatic and musical performances that celebrated the union’s culture; in sum, by actively engaging in a culture which they were expected also to reproduce. As the “Poetry of Labor” article makes clear, poetry was of central importance within the union’s educational culture, as it was seen to be a medium through which the union culture could be both expressed and reproduced. However, the way in which the functioning of the ILGWU’s culture was predicated on a necessary and continuous reflection on the cultural and material processes through which this culture was sustained is politically important, because it allowed workers to see the social conditions which supported their cultural engagement. This was true even on a financial level. As Tyler relates, some union officers challenged President David Dubinsky over the fact that, by 1934, the “union was budgeting more than a quarter of a million dollars a year on educational, cultural, recreational, and training programs” (Tyler 196-197). Dubinsky faced up to this challenge, arguing that “It is not enough that they [union members] should pay us dues. They should know what we stand for” (qtd. in Tyler 197). However, this disagreement

indicates that union members were aware of the financial as well as the ideological conditions through which their culture was sustained. In this respect, the reflexive character of the union's educational and cultural activity itself presents a challenge to political privilege, because it challenges the naturalization of the discourse of culture through which this privilege is legitimated. The challenge which the cultural activity of the organised labour movement presents to the idea of art as "an 'affection' of the heart or immediate enlightenment of the intuition" suggests itself as another reason why the study of this culture has been so thoroughly discouraged and undermined (Bourdieu 234). Furthermore, the deeper political significance of Starr's seemingly naïve and idealistic argument that "the pursuit of happiness depends more than ever on wiping out social illiteracy" is now brought into view. The strength of Starr's allegory lies in the concise way in which it shows that social mastery is dependent on the prior "possession of the means of possession," i.e. social literacy, which would allow the working-classes to read more accurately the terms of their own existence, and re-articulate those relations in their own terms (Bourdieu 234). Ultimately then, the literary culture of the ILGWU was uniquely positioned within a self-reflexive pedagogical environment which allowed members to reflect continuously on the social conditions which rendered imaginative acts possible. While, as I will go on to discuss, much of the content of the ILGWU's literary material expresses an idealistic celebration of the union itself, the ideological and material context in which this idealism is expressed have been disclosed. To announce that workers are "builders of a new culture," then, is a politically significant acknowledgement that culture is something which can be built.

## Chapter 4 - Poetry Collections of the ILGWU

### 4.1 Introduction

In his 1944 lecture “Labor and Education,” prepared for the New England Association of Teachers of Social Studies, Mark Starr discusses the role of adult workers’ education in modern life. Starr argues that one of the chief values of the development of the social sciences is that they are able to provide workers with knowledge that can be applied directly to the problems of modern society. Starr argues, “teachers cannot substitute knowledge about the past for action in the present. They must give the individual information so that he can do something about the social problems of today” (“Labor and Education” 3). Importantly, Starr argues that the American education system, including schools and colleges, fails to provide workers with knowledge adequate to dealing with present circumstances. In his view, this is because existing education systems aim to impart knowledge at the level of the individual, rather than addressing the way in which modernity impacts workers at a collective level. He argues that the social problems of the day face the worker, “not as an individual, but as a unit in an economic group and member of his community” (3). Therefore, insofar as it fails to equip the worker with knowledge of his or her role within a collective social body, education cannot support enhanced social literacy or societal progress. Making this argument in the context of the Second World War, Starr complains that “We talk too glibly about global war without realizing what that means in expanding our mental horizons (3). Technical development in transport and communication – the tempo of whose application has been intensified stupendously by the needs of modern war time – has hardly penetrated our minds” (3).

Similarly, the socialist poets Lucia Trent and Ralph Cheyney argue in their critical work *More Power to Poets* (1934) that the conditions of modern society, particularly the developments of technology and advertising, have led to a situation in which the imagination itself has fallen victim to the processes of alienation and instrumentalisation latent to the workings of capitalism. They argue that “Economists and sociologists have charted many routes to the Promised Land. They have built splendid platforms for our choice.... So we say, “Fine!” or, “Oh yeah!” and let



ourselves fall deeper and deeper into standardized patterns of thought and feeling” (8). Complaining that in the United States “so much of what passes for thinking is done in slogans,” Trent and Cheyney argue that large numbers of American citizens are driven to live abroad in order to “escape from the patterns of thought and action imposed upon them at home” (24). Similar to Starr, Trent and Cheyney articulate the idea that there is a danger that the collective imagination of the American people is becoming subject to forces beyond its control, stultifying in the wake of increased homogenization. The wider currency of this idea within the Left is evident in Paul Potts’ article “Literature and Socialism,” published in *The Post* on 15 March, 1948. I found this article included in the personal papers of Mark Starr while conducting research at the Tamiment Library, New York. Ominously, Potts predicts that “We may possibly be approaching the new dark ages, where for long static centuries the human spirit will be bruised by the weight of a chain-store bureaucracy” (156). Within this context, proclaims Potts, “A velvet padlock may easily fasten chromium-plated chains across the entrance of the human mind” (156). As I discussed in Chapter 1, these concerns about the way in which the imaginative capabilities of ordinary people was becoming threatened by modernity was echoed by poets Muriel Rukeyser and Hugh MacDiarmid, who shared an understanding that the increased specialisation of knowledge brought about by the development of modern capitalism was a form of mental stupefaction that would lead to mass political impotence. As MacDiarmid wrote in the “Third Hymn to Lenin,” “most insidious and stultifying of all/ The anti-human forces that have instilled the thought/ That knowledge has outrun the individual brain.... Until a sense of impotence compels/ Most men in petty grooves to stay confined” (“Third Hymn to Lenin”). This anxiety among the Left about the nature and function of the imagination in modern society has gone un-noticed within existing scholarship, yet Potts’ rhetoric demonstrates how keenly it was felt at the time.

In Starr’s view, the disjunction between collective mental horizons and the altered psychological landscape created by modernity weakens the foundation of knowledge required to work toward social progress. Moving quickly through the present, simple past and future subjunctive tenses, Starr argues that “We have to fill up the dangerous gaps left in our learning before we proceed to tell the truth about things as they are, things as they have been, and things as they should be as we defend past advances and build for a better future” (“Labor and Education” 7). Ultimately, for

Starr, the ideal future can only be arrived at by developing an educational program that acknowledges the existing limitations of workers' collective mental horizons, and works to revivify and expand their imaginative capabilities. He states, "we shall have to re-tool our minds as well as our workshops" (10). For Trent and Cheyney, poetry has a vital role to play in allowing people to break out of the habitual patterns of thought and feeling engendered by capitalism. They argue, "Poetry is practical because it demands participation. A poem is no pre-digested thought. It does not call upon you to buy some mass product, accept some mass product" (10). Furthermore, they write, "It spurs to action, action of your own imagination and intuition, directed but not dictated by the author" (10). Insofar as poetry can serve as a means of resistance to the stultification of the imagination, poets are, for Trent and Cheyney, "pioneers of consciousness" (76). Like Starr, Trent and Cheyney view the free exercise of the imagination as fundamental to the realisation of an idealised future. In his introduction to *Unrest: The Rebel Poet's Anthology* (1930), Cheyney argues that "Poets at their best are also prophets – ambassadors of the future, destroyers of the present. They impregnate time with their dreams and what they conceive the future delivers" (Cheyney and Conroy 11). The ILGWU Educational Department, too, asserted the role of the arts in bridging the imaginative divide between the increasingly oppressive conditions of the present and a more hopeful vision of the future. In a booklet entitled *Books for a Troubled World* (1946), the Educational Department printed a summary of the panel discussion on the subject "Building the Future" which the union held at the Museum of Modern Art on November 24, 1945. The short summary of the discussion argues that the war has accentuated the importance of art: "After the shocking experiences which the world has gone through in the last six years," influences must be sought which can "contribute to the building of a lasting peace and a better life for all mankind" (*Books for a Troubled World*). The article states that "One of these influences is art." Furthermore, the ILGWU "has always had confidence in the idealism, in the constructive impulses of the plain people" and views art as a means to foster and channel such impulses, "Our union believes that the creative artist has a real contribution to make in promoting peace and good will." This sentiment was echoed by Archibald MacLeish in his 1943 article "Tools in Our Hands," published in *The Labor Review* (also found in the personal papers of Mark Starr), in which he propounds the role of the imagination in bringing forth a progressive future. MacLeish writes, "The determination of the American future depends upon the American people. It depends upon their power to imagine such a

future as they want and can believe in” (11). Moreover, he argues, “The tradition of the imagination is behind us as behind no people in the history of the world” (11). It is in this context of contemporary Left concern surrounding the role of the imagination in modern society that the poetry collections of the ILGWU can most usefully be considered. As I will show, the poems included in the collections that I will discuss perform and seek to inspire acts of both individual and collective imaginative labour that were intended to serve as a means of moving towards an idealised future.

#### **4.2 Tools in Their Hands, for Building New Minds: A General Description of ILGWU Poetry Collections**

The collections I will discuss include *Poems by and for Workers* (1941), *Garment Workers Speak* (1940) and *The History of the ILGWU in Song and Poem* (1957). These specific collections were chosen because they were the only three collections produced by the ILGWU Educational Department which I found during archival research at the Tamiment Library, New York University. My analysis of the role of poetry within ILGWU culture is inevitably conditioned by the time and resources available to me as a doctoral researcher. Hopefully, this initial investigation will pave the way for further archival research and recovery work pertaining to ILGWU poetry. For now, though, the three collections considered here provide ample material to lay the groundwork for an analysis of the way in which poetry was being used by within the union.

In general, the collections contain a mixture of poems and articles relating to work, significant events within ILGWU history, and the labour movement and working life more widely. As I will go on to discuss in more detail, each of the collections mixes poems written by members of ILGWU locals with poems or quotations from writers from outside the labour movement, including, for example, Walt Whitman and the then English poet Laureate John Masefield. Whitman’s poetry was used within the labour movement more broadly. A syllabus from the Bryn Mawr workers’ summer school literature class of 1929 includes seven poems by Whitman, including “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” and “Oh Captain! My Captain!” (“Syllabus”). Included also in the collections are poems by professional writers who were widely read during the time, but who are lesser known today, including the popular American poet Edward Markham and the British poet Thomas Hood. Indeed, the inclusion of poems by writers like Markham and Hood indicates the way in which the topology of poetic modernism can

be mapped differently by studying the poetry of the labour movement, rather than retroactively tracing the development of what later came to be canonical modernism. The composition of the ILGWU poetry booklets was carried out within a poetic landscape which today has largely been obscured from view.

The collections are printed on thin, cheap paper with the covers printed on thicker paper. The collections have no illustrations, but are printed in a clear type-script, and there is ample blank space surrounding poems and articles. Overall, the collections are easy to read and handle, and would have been amenable to wide-scale reproduction and distribution among the various union locals.

#### **4.2 “Master of the world I’ve made”: *Poems by and for Workers and Garment Workers Speak***

Addressing the centrality of work to the daily lives of ILGWU members, *Poems by and for Workers*, as the brief introductory statement makes clear, is intended as a companion piece to the more substantial volume *Garment Workers Speak*, the thematic focus of which is more specifically rooted in the experiences of ILGWU workers. Mixing work by better known professional writers and lesser known union poets, this companion to the exclusively union-authored *Garment Workers Speak* situates ILGWU literary production within a wider sphere of American literary culture. As the title indicates, *Poems by and for Workers* brings together poems which take the experience of work as their central theme. In this respect, the choice of poems included has been determined on the basis of their contribution to this theme, rather than on the basis of any formal respect for a distinction between professional and non-professional writers. Union poetry was not written in a cultural vacuum; rather, union poets read and engaged with a range of canonical and non-canonical writers. Indeed, page three of the collection includes unattributed quotations from Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg and Whitman’s poem “Brothers.” The extracts from both Whitman and Sandburg establish the theme of the collection as a whole, celebrating workers’ culture and solidarity. The initial quotation from Whitman enjoins America to strengthen and propound the collective identity of its citizenry, “show to the world what your children en masse really are.” Following this, Whitman’s “Brothers” positions the American in solidarity with his international brethren. An anonymous worker states that “I can look over and behold/ them in Germany, Italy, France, Spain/ Or far, far away, in China, or in Russia or Japan.... I know we should be brothers and lovers.” Written below this, is an untitled

quotation from Carl Sandburg which further clarifies the nature of workers' solidarity being valorised. While the quotation from Whitman celebrates the internationalist perspective of the American worker, the quotation from Sandburg affirms the shared humanity of men, women and children, "There is only one man in the world and his/ name is All Men. There is only one woman in the world and her name is All Women. There is only one child in the world and the/ name is All Children." As these opening quotations from Whitman and Sandburg indicate, the inclusion of the work of professional writers within ILGWU was justified by the extent to which this work resonated with the theme of celebrating workers' culture and solidarity.

The introductory remarks included on page two of the collection make clear the way in which poetry played an important role within the union's culture, and played an active role in the interrelationship between the union's central Educational department and individual members. The statement continues, "We invite our members to send us any poems which they themselves have written or enjoyed so that we can issue other similar collections" (*Poems by and for Workers* 1). The introductory remarks also demonstrate that poetry was one aspect of a variety of cultural activities promoted by the union, encouraging readers of *Poems by and for Workers* to "write in to the Educational Department for details of other publications, pamphlets, books, songs, plays, victrola records, filmstrips, etc" (*Poems by and for Workers* 1).

ILGWU literature collections were intended to be read in the context of other union publications and also the classes in which the union fostered learning and discussion about union issues. For example, the foreword to *Garment Workers Speak* provides an indication of how the Educational Department of the ILGWU envisaged that the literature collections which they produced should be used. Although it was produced by the central Educational department, *Garment Workers Speak* was intended to be reproduced and distributed by the various regional locals either in whole or in part. The foreword states, "We hope that mimeographed journals issued by the various locals will borrow and use as much as they can every one of the items which this collection contains" (*Garment Workers Speak*). The introduction to *Poems by and for Workers* was intended to be read in conjunction with *Garment Workers Speak*, but the foreword to the latter collection suggests that it should also "be used along with 'Mother Goose Goes Union', 'That Reminds Me...' (our collection of jokes and stories), and 'The ILGWU Quiz' in our various advanced English classes as well as in Labor Problems"

(*Garment Workers Speak*). In addition to providing a means for workers to “express themselves,” then, *Garment Workers Speak* was also intended as an educational tool to further knowledge of the English language and labour problems among ILGWU members. Similarly, the introduction to *The History of the ILGWU in Song and Poem*, written by Mark Starr, demonstrates the inter-textual way in which the collection was planned to be used. Interspersing song and poetry, references are frequently given throughout the body of the collection which refer to specific items of sheet music or phonograph records which were to be used in conjunction with the song printed on the page. Starr explains in the introduction, “The page references given for the songs refer to the ILGWU songbook, “Everybody Sings,” copies of which should be distributed to the audience” (ILGWU, 1957, first un-numbered page). Interspersing song and poetry, Starr argues that *The History of the ILGWU in Song and Poetry* is a deliberate attempt to forge a narrative structure from a range of diverse material. Starr writes, “We tried to replace the usual haphazard songfest with a sequence of songs and poems to illustrate the development of the Union” (*Poems by and for Workers*). While encouraging union members to read across genres from song to poetry, and to use literature alongside music in local educational activities, the flexibility of the union’s cultural methodology was created with the intention of bolstering the strength of the union as both a political and cultural institution. Starr writes, “We hoped to impart information and inspiration and, at the same time, to acquaint our members with the cultural richness of the labor movement” (*Poems by and for Workers*). However, the union’s fostering of a literary culture was not carried out with a purely didactic intent. A subsection entitled “What Kind of Books?” in the ILGWU booklet *Books for a Troubled World* (1946), states “Twenty five years ago, when we were planning the Book Division in the ILGWU Educational Department, the question arose as to what our policy should be ... our main objective is to interest our people in reading books, even if their choice does not meet entirely with their standards” (*Books for a Troubled World*). Furthermore, the Educational Department hoped that the publications which they produced would be read and used in relation to one another. The inter-relationship between the texts fostered a reading environment in which literary genres were to be considered not only in relation to one another, but also in relation to a variety of other forms and media including union joke-books, records, sheet music, and film strips. The ILGWU also produced a small book of poems aimed at children, entitled *Mother Goose Goes Union*. On January 23, 1937, Charles Schwartz, who was an editor in the Educational Department, wrote to

Mark Starr, informing him of several poems that he had collected during research at The Rand School of Social Science, that he felt could be used for publication in *Mother Goose*. Schwartz writes, “Below are some Mother Goose rimes I came across in two old pamphlets on file in the Pamphlet Room of the Rand School Library.” One of the poems included begins, “Rock-a-bye baby,/ on the tree top/ when you grow up/ You’ll work in the shop” (Schwartz). The ILGWU sought to mould a future generation of unionists through the medium of poetry and verse.

It is also important to note that the ILGWU joke-book *That Reminds Me* is an interesting cultural artefact in its own right. The jokes focus on a number of themes including the trials of organising labour, gender relations (including jokes which address the sexual exploitation of female garment workers at the hands of male factory foremen), and jokes about the economy and current political situation. There are many jokes which emphasise the importance of organisation within the garment trade, suggesting that such jokes were used by educational leaders to impart important messages in a lighter vein. For example, one joke reads “Union suit: A suit made of one piece, except when made in a non-union shop, in which case there’s no peace at all” (*That Reminds Me* 14). Like *Garment Workers Speak*, *That Reminds Me* was intended for wide-scale use within the union’s educational program. The Introduction states, “we hope that our organizers will find useful stories for their speeches and that the editors of our local journals will be able to find herein amusing ‘fillers’ for their columns” (*That Reminds Me* 1). The fact that *Garment Workers Speak* was intended to be read alongside the joke book suggests the important role which organisers felt humour could play in fostering solidarity among ILGWU members.

Ultimately, then, the publications produced by the ILGWU’s Educational Department were intended for distribution, reproduction and use as inter-related texts which were intended to be read alongside and as part of the union’s overall program of cultural activities. The way in which Roland Barthes conceives of the relationship between “work” and “Text” in his essay “From Work to Text” (1971) is helpful in considering the relationship between individual ILGWU poetry collections and the wider literary and cultural programme of activity of which they were a part. The literary practices adopted by the ILGWU anticipate the critique of the “work” that Barthes contributed to post-Structuralist theory. Indeed, ILGWU poetry unsettles the historically privileged position of the work as the starting point of critical interpretation.

In “From Work to Text,” Barthes argues that the fundamental difference between work and Text is that “the work is a fragment of a substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example), the Text is a methodological field” (“From Work to text” 1471). Barthes shows that this fundamental distinction between the work as occupying a “space” and the Text as the manifestation of a “methodological field” is elaborated in relation to a number of other supplementary distinctions.

Firstly, he explains that while the work is a finished product which “can be seen,” the Text is “a process of demonstration” which “*is experienced only in an activity of production*” (“From Work to Text” 1471). While the individual literary collections produced by the ILGWU exist as objects which can be held and seen, the introductory remarks to the collections under consideration make clear the way in which their intended use can be understood as an activity of production, which works to express and reproduce ILGWU culture. Barthes also argues that the difference between work and Text is one of form. The work has historically been accorded “respect” as a legal and physical entity, whereas the Text can be understood as the expression of a formal relation, “the metaphor of the Text is that of the *network*” (1473). As the expression of a formal relationship which constitutes an activity of production, the Text pays no heed to the formal integrity of the work, and as a result Barthes argues that “it can be broken” (1473). Similarly, while individual ILGWU collections exist as works, their use within an overall program of cultural production is understood to undermine the importance of their formal integrity, as is made clear in the introduction to *The History of the ILGWU in Song and Poem* which urges that “If time is lacking, some of the poems can be shortened or omitted” (*History of the ILGWU*). Here, the reader has the option of either respecting the integrity of the collection as work if time permits or, if time is lacking, the reader is invited to engage in a productive breaking of the Text.

Additionally, Barthes’ understanding of the way in which “the Text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading” by joining the reader and the work “in a single signifying practice” is useful when considering the signification of ILGWU poetry booklets (“From Work to Text” 1474). As the introductory remarks to the different collections make clear, this poetry was intended for use within local ILGWU educational activities, in a way which indeed diminished the distance between writing and reading. Poems which often had been written by union members were to be read and recited by other union members, a



process which could inspire other workers to write their own poems. The introduction to *The History of the ILGWU in Song and Poem* states that “The reading of the poems could well be divided among members with a talent for reading aloud” (*History of the ILGWU*). Furthermore, it was hoped that readers of these collections would become writers, and in turn contribute to the activity of literary production. The opening statement of *Poems by and for Workers*, for example, offers an invitation “to our members to send us any poems which they have written or enjoyed so that we can issue other similar collections” (*Poems by and for Workers* 2). Similarly, the foreword to *Garment Workers Speak* expresses the hope that these “stories will encourage many other of our members to express themselves and send us in their efforts” (*Garment Workers Speak*). Moreover, the distance between writer and reader was reduced to the point of non-existence by the limerick competition run in the *Mother Goose* booklet. A note included in Mark Starr’s papers provides materials and instructions for the *Mother Goose* limerick contest. The note states, “When you use these in your journal of course you will omit the last line and offer a prize for lines sent in” (“Limerick Instructions”). The first example given reads “Hurray, our strike is won/ The sweatshops on the run/ With our union strong/ We’ll march along/ Until our task is done.” Inviting readers to provide their own concluding lines, the customary distance between reception and participation is transgressed.

The literary activities of the ILGWU were carried out on the basis of a diminished distance between reader and writer. Utilising poetry as a collective activity of production, the ILGWU could thereby foster an environment in which members not only re-imagine their own future together, but were made to see their own direct association with this enterprise, at a time when there was anxiety that workers were becoming alienated from their own imaginations.

ILGWU literary discussion groups which looked at canonical literature were organised with the idea of increasing the political agency of its members in mind. A 1934 pamphlet produced by the ILGWU’s central Educational Department entitled “Suggestions for Social, Educational and Recreational Program for our Local Unions” briefly outlines the “educational methods” appropriate for the “Social Interpretation of Literature.” The outline states that “true literary artists are prophets” who “interpret the forces that are in the process for social and economic change” (“Suggestions” 6). “It is for this reason,” the statement concludes, that “we urge our locals to include in their

program discussions on the social interpretation of literature” (6). This emphasis on the role of literature within social interpretation ties with the Educational Department’s broader theme of using education as means to enhance the societal awareness and agency of its members. In *Books for a Troubled World*, an anonymous author states that “It is also the aim of worker’s education to help the adult to analyse trends to interpret events and to make his daily experience more meaningful. It is our fervent conviction that the worker will make sacrifices for ideals if they only understand them” (*Books for a Troubled World*). Ultimately, the reduction of the distance between praxis and interpretation within ILGWU cultural activity served as one means of attempting to provide union members with a greater mastery over contemporary socio-political and cultural discourses. At a time when the imagination itself was perceived as being under threat from the standardization of thought engendered by industrial working-conditions and machine technology, the ILGWU’s Educational Department understood the potential role of literature, and poetry in particular, as a means of developing workers’ imaginative capacities and wider social intelligence.

### 4.3 Poems as Usable Objects

As a companion piece to the more substantial collection *Garment Workers Speak*, the poetry collection *Poems by and for Workers* should be considered within the union’s overall educational and cultural context. While the experience of work is the central theme around which the collection is built, the opening statement draws the reader’s attention to the utility of the collection itself as a cultural object which would have been actively distributed among and used by union members. This sense of the poetry collection as a usable object is accentuated in the specific copies of *Poems by and for Workers* and *The History of the ILGWU in Song and Poem* which I obtained at the Tamiment Library. Although these are only individual copies, they give an indication as to the way in which a union reader felt able to approach a collection of poetry as a body of work which was to have an immediate use within union life, rather than appreciating it as an autonomous aesthetic object. The copies of these collections include newspaper cuttings which have been glued onto pages, and handwritten annotations. In drawing attention to the materiality of the poetry booklets, I am building on Michael Thurston’s argument that poetry elicits political engagement not only by way of its content, but also through “the things politically engaged agents do *with* poems” (20). Thurston continues, “the textual acts of poems occur in the contexts

of other acts, textual and otherwise; a poem does its cultural work from the material location of the page” (20). The political import of a poem is determined not solely through an appreciation of its content, but also through an appreciation of the material and political usages to which the poem is put. An analysis of the material aspects of the ILGWU poetry booklets allows for a fuller appreciation of the way in which the poetry was used, than could be afforded by restricting the scope of the analysis to individual poems considered in isolation from their bibliographic context.

The opening page of *Poems by and for Workers*, for example, includes a cutting from a newspaper article which has been glued onto the paper. This copy of *Poems by and for Workers* has been treated as a usable object. Overall, the bibliographic features suggest an editorial function, whereby the collection is being amended for improvement or adaptation for use within a specific union context – although the features do not indicate whether or not this booklet was being adapted for a specific union local. For example, the editorial function is suggested by the pencilled-in comment at the beginning of the first page, which reads simply “(Poems),” suggesting that the author of

this comment intends that the poem cited in the cutting should be included within subsequent reproductions of the collection. Additionally, just above the title “Psalm of the Unorganized,” a poem printed on page 20, there is the pencilled comment “5 copies.” This comment suggests that, despite the collection being structured around a central organising theme, individual poems were to have been copied and distributed.

Moreover, the inclusion of this

poem is an example of how the Educational Department felt able to use poems which had previously been included in the publications of other labour unions. At the end of

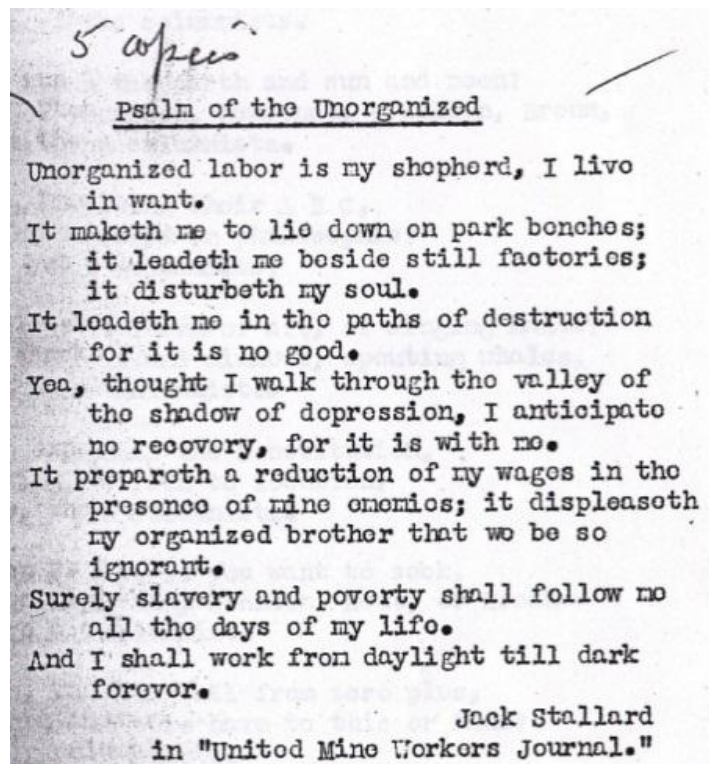


Figure 8 – “Psalm of the Unorganized.” *Poems by and for Workers*. Booklet. 1941. TS. Tamiment Library, New York. Print.

the poem the name of the author and source publication is given, “‘Jack Stallard’ in ‘United Mine Workers Journal.’” In creating a collection of poetry, then, the ILGWU Educational Department was able to draw on a body of poems produced by other contemporary labour unions, in so far as these poems expressed ideas commensurate with the educational aims of the ILGWU. This particular poem, “Psalm of the Unorganised,” offers a quasi-religious lament for the negative impact which unorganised labour has on the organised worker, “It prepareth a reduction of my wages in the/ presence of mine enemies; it displeatheth/ my organized brother that we be so ignorant” (*Poems by and for Workers* 20). The speaker of the poem is an unorganised labourer, propounding on the debilitating nature of his unorganised predicament.

The use of the psalm form reflects the way in which the ILGWU’s Jewish heritage informed its cultural production. Indeed, the way in which poems such as “Psalm of the Unorganized,” were intended to be copied and used in a variety of union situations reflects the way in which the biblical Book of Psalms has been used within Judaism as a flexible resource, different sections of which can be consulted for specific purposes or occasions. Rabbi Louis Jacobs describes the flexibility of the way in which the Book of Psalms has been used in Jewish cultural practice, in both the liturgy and in individual prayer. He writes, “In addition to their recital as part of the standard service, the Psalms have been recited by individuals whenever the mood took them. Some pious Jews would recite the whole Book of Psalms each week, some even each day” (395). Additionally, “‘Saying Psalms’, as it is called, is often practised as a prayer for a sick person or when other calamities threaten” (Jacobs 395). Although “Psalm of the Unorganized” is the only psalm included in these collections, the flexible role of the Book of Psalms within Jewish culture suggests itself as a methodological basis for the way in which ILGWU poetry collections were adapted for use to suit a variety of needs and purposes. Moreover, the way in which the “psalm” form has been adapted in *Poems by and for Workers* in order to extol the value of labour organisation suggests that the Jewish heritage of the ILGWU informed formal and thematic aspects of its poetic production in a similar fashion as many songs of the American Left were directly adapted from Christian songs, in particular the *Little Red Songbook* produced by the International Workers’ of the World. Robbie Lieberman argues that one of the most widely sung songs of the American Communist movement of the early twentieth century, “We Shall Overcome,” was an adaptation of “the old Negro church song ‘I’ll

Over-come Someday”” (151). Just as musicians associated with the Communist movement, including Pete Seeger and Lee Hays, drew on Christian spirituals as an appropriate musical vehicle for their social message, the ILGWU poetry books could draw on Jewish cultural references when articulating their social message. For example, the second section of *The History of the ILGWU in Song and Poem*, entitled “Unions Have a Long and Successful Record of Protest Against Exploitation” includes the statement, “Moses might be named the first organising secretary of the Brickmaker’s Union” (*History of the ILGWU* 1). The biblical exodus is here described in the language of contemporary labour relations, “there is the story of the successful rebellion of the Israelites against the stretch-out enforced by Pharaoh when he compelled the workers to collect their own materials and at the same time maintain output” (*History of the ILGWU* 1). This statement is immediately followed by an abbreviated text of the spiritual song “Go Down Moses.” The issues of workers’ exploitation and the problem of the labour “stretch-out” can be more succinctly and efficiently explained to the union readership by being conveyed in terms of familiar cultural references.

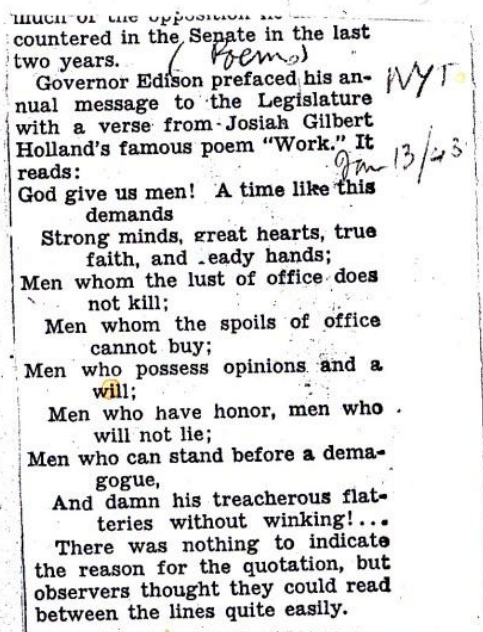


Figure 9 - "Work." *Poems by and for Workers*. Booklet. 1941. TS. Tamiment Library. New York.

The newspaper cutting pasted on to the first page of the collection is a further example of the way in which this edition of *Poems by and for Workers* has been treated as a material object which can be edited and adapted. This cutting is positioned immediately opposite the introductory statement, thereby responding to the call for direct engagement which the statement elicits. The source publication and date of the

cutting is noted in pencil in the margin to the right of the text, “NYT Jan 13/43.” The text begins, “Governor Edison prefaced his annual message to the Legislature with a verse from Josiah Gilbert Holland’s famous poem ‘Work.’” The short poem which follows sets up a clear opposition between noble working men with “Strong minds, great hearts, true/ faith, and ready hands” and a weak, corrupt straw “demagogue” who enjoys the “spoils of office” (*Poems by and for Workers* 1). “Governor Edison” refers to the then Democratic Governor of New Jersey, Charles Edison whose campaign was based on a reaction to the notoriously corrupt political machinations of Frank Hague, the mayor of Jersey City (Rosmaita). Reading this poem in the state Legislature, it is clear that Hague is the demagogic target of Edison’s poetic address. Indeed, the cutting from the article concludes with the wry observation that “There was nothing to indicate the reason for the quotation, but observers thought they could read between the lines quite easily” (*Poems by and for Workers* 1).

The inclusion of this cutting at the beginning of *Poems by and for Workers* is revealing in a number of respects. Firstly, the very presence of a newspaper cutting pasted on to the front page of the collection draws attention to the materiality of the text. Secondly, the description of “Work” as a “famous” poem provides an insight into the status of poetry within contemporary American culture, suggesting that poetry maintained a degree of popular and social currency despite its increased idealization and diminished political role, which resulted from the growing influence of high modernism within the American academy from the mid-1920s onwards. Furthermore, the reference to a nineteenth century poet whose work is little known today demonstrates that the study of canonical writers alone cannot account for a full understanding of poetry’s political engagement in American culture at this time. The very fact that Edison drew on a poem as weapon of satirical critique to be deployed in the state Legislature of New Jersey suggests that the critical boundary between poetry and politics was not adhered to strictly within the American political sphere during this time. The poem has an unusual typography which supports the rhetorical opposition established between the noble working men and the corrupt political demagogue. The affirmation of workers’ valour is articulated in negative terms supported by a typographical arrangement in which a lengthy statement is offset through line breaks which lead to short negative phrases:

Men whom the lust of office does  
   not kill;  
 Men whom the spoils of office  
   cannot buy. (*Poems by and for Workers* 1)

Interestingly, then, this poem which has been inserted onto the opening page of a collection which takes workers' identity as its central theme establishes this identity in negative, rather than positive, terms. This suggests that one galvanizing feature of workers' identity was this negatively defined perception of the worker as lacking corruption, greed and vanity. In so doing, this opening poem provides an initial negative depiction of workers' identity which offsets and therefore illuminates the subsequent poems which articulate, for the most part, positive articulations of workers' identity as honourable members of the organised labour movement.

#### **4.4 Labour and the Imagination**

In what way do the poems included in the collection *Poems by and for Workers* more specifically contribute to the raising of working-class consciousness and the building of ILGWU culture? The poem "Labor" by Berton Braley, included in the collection *Poems by and for Workers*, dramatizes the raising of class consciousness. Although now almost entirely forgotten, Braley (1882-1966) was a prolific journalist and poet whose work was published in a wide range of magazines, newspapers and anthologies throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. Additionally, several monograph collections of his verse were published, including *Songs of the Workday World* (1915) and *New Deal Ditties: Or, Running in the Red with Roosevelt* (1936) ("Books"). Although he was not an ILGWU member, Braley's poetry was available to readers and editors working within the union's Educational Department. His poem, "Labor," which is number 14 of 24 numbered poems, addresses the central theme of the collection. The poem reads as follows:

Out of chaos, out of murk,  
 I arose and did my work;  
 While the ages changed and sped,  
 I was toiling for my bread.

Underneath my sturdy blows  
 Forests fell and cities rose,  
 And the hard reluctant soil  
 Blossomed richly from my toil.

Rich indeed was my reward –  
 Stunted soul and body scarred  
 With the marks of scourge and rod.

I, the tiller of the sod,  
 From the cradle to the grave  
 Shambled through the world - a slave.  
 Crushed and trampled, beaten, cursed.  
 Serving best, but served the worst,  
 Starved and cheated, gouged and  
       spoiled.

Still I builded, still I toiled,  
 Undernourished, underpaid,  
 In the world myself had made.

Up from slavery I rise,  
 Dreams and wonder in my eyes.  
 I was slave – but I am free:  
 I was blind – but I can see:  
 I, the builder, I, the maker,

I, the calm tradition breaker,  
 Unimpassioned, unafraid,  
 Master of the world I've made: ("Labor")



As the title indicates, this poem is about work, the central topic around which the collection is organised. Printed on its own as a single word, lacking any subject or definite article, “Labor” can be read in both its adjectival and substantive forms, referring both to the act of labouring and to labour as embodied in a specific task, or in the labour force, and also calls attention to the poem itself as both the product of and an act of labour.

The poem is composed of eight stanzas, the length of which reflects the thematic development of the poem. The first two stanzas are four lines long, and establish the subject and theme of the poem. There is then a middle section of three three-line stanzas and one four-line stanza which expound further on the topic, and provide a bridge to the culminating section, which is composed of one five line and one three line stanza. The closing eight lines, which offer a resolution to the poem, provide an exact counterweight to the poem’s opening eight-line section. The simplicity of the construction, language, and imagery used in this poem belies the significance of the poem’s articulation of the relationship between labour and discourse. Dismissing the poem immediately solely on the basis of its aesthetic merit does not allow the reader to fully appreciate the relationship of this aesthetic to the poem’s exploration of the topic of “Labor.” In discussing this poem, I will explore the significance and extent to which it engages with the concept of “alienated labour” outlined by Karl Marx in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844). In so doing, I will assess the political significance of the poem, and its relationship to the political and cultural aims of the ILGWU more broadly.

The relatively abstract title, “Labor,” leads into an opening sentence which attempts to root “Labor” in the real, physical world, through the repetition of the foundational prepositional phrase, “out of” (“Labor”). The grounding expression of the opening line, “Out of chaos, out of murk,” is then located more specifically on the next line in the first-person subject of a worker, “I arose and did my work.” Having located an individual speaking voice, the third line again widens the perspective to an abstract, passing expanse of time, against which the individual stands in permanent relief, rooted to his labour, “While the ages changed and sped,/ I was toiling for my bread.” The second stanza further develops the contrast between the isolated worker figure and the world which is increasingly realised as a product of his labour. The speaking subject represents an abstract figure of a worker who has existed throughout the ages, whose

existence has been continuously defined through toil. But what relationship, in more specific terms, do the two opening stanzas establish between the worker and the world?

Interestingly, the specific origins of the conditions of labour are obscured from view, and are abstracted from any specific historical circumstances. Indeed, the worker arose “out of chaos, out of murk.” Why should the original historical conditions of labour be obscured from view? What is the political import of this abstraction? In the section “Private Property and Communism” in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx reflects on the way in which the origins of the relationship between man, labour, and world history have been obscured from view. In a passage in section five, Marx stages a dialogue between himself, as the narrator of the text, and an imaginary interlocutor. In this section, Marx states that “The idea of creation is thus one that it is very difficult to drive out of the minds of people” (94). As it pertains to the existence of the earth, Marx argues that the idea of creation “received a severe blow from the science of geogeny, the science which describes the formation and coming into being of the earth as a process of self-generation” (94-95). While “the science of geogeny” has made it possible to see the way in which the earth was formed through its own materials, out of itself, Marx complains that people find it difficult to apply this logic to the history of humankind. The figure of the interlocutor demonstrates the common line of thought which seeks the origins of man outside of man. Beginning with the observation that “you are engendered by your father and mother,” the interlocutor “pushes me [the speaker] ever further backwards until I ask, who created the first man and the world as a whole?” (95). Railing against this question, the speaker challenges the premise of the interlocutor’s question, “Ask yourself how you come to ask such a question” (95). The speaker chides the interlocutor, “when you enquire about the nature of the world and man, then you abstract from man and the world. You suppose them non-existent and yet require me to prove to you that they exist” (95). Seeking the origins of mankind outside of the demonstrable physical circumstances of his existence is the product of an abstraction that denies the rootedness of the interlocutor in the reality of which he is a part, to which the speaker offers the rejoinder, “if you think of man and the world as non-existent then think of yourself as non-existent, also, for you too are part of the world and man” (95). The speaker ultimately denies an account of history which is premised on such an abstraction, “I say to you: give up your abstraction and you will give up your question” (95).

In this passage, Marx demonstrates that the reason why historical enquiry founded on abstraction is so damaging is because it obfuscates the true nature of the relationship between man, labour and history. Against the abstract idea of creation generated from a state of non-existence, Marx argues that “since for socialist man what is called world history is nothing but the creation of man by labour and the development of nature for man, he has the observable and irrefutable proof of his self-creation and the process of his origin” (95). Locating the origin of man in an abstract event obscures the nature of the process through which man exists as a product of his own labour. The abstraction of the poem’s opening line, then, expresses the idea that the worker’s continuous toil is a natural, timeless and inevitable condition, rather than the result of a historically determined relationship between man and world. The naturalization of the relationship between worker and world is also reflected in the second stanza, in which the speaker states that “the hard reluctant soil/ Blossomed richly from my toil,” and is also reinforced through the easy progression of the a-a-b-b rhyme scheme.

However, the abstraction which leads to an obfuscation of man’s origins itself originates as a result of the alienation of man from the conditions of labour. In “Property and Communism,” Marx states that the reason why people “find it almost impossible to conceive of nature and man as existing through themselves” is because “it contradicts all the evidences of practical life” (94). Man has been alienated from the conditions of labour, and thus fails to realise himself as the product of a process from which he has been alienated. Marx argues that, in the capitalist mode of production, the “social forms of labour” - meaning the social relations under which labour is carried out- in addition to the products of that labour, confront the worker as an alien and external force. In a specifically capitalist mode of production, Marx argues, the “social forms of labour” appear as “forms of development of capital, so that the productive forces, thus developed, of social labour appear as productive forces of capital: as such, they are ‘capitalized’ over against labour” (51). The language in which Marx describes the process of the development of the relations of labour under capital is unflinchingly violent. He argues that in the capitalist mode of production, both the products of labour and the social forms of labour “get up on their hind legs and confront him [the labourer] as ‘capital’” (393). The worker is alienated not only from the social forms of labour, but also from the end products of this labour, as “the summary of the activity of production” (80). As Marx states, “The alienation of the object of labour is only the

resumé of alienation, the externalization in the activity of labour itself” (80). Alienated from both the relations and products of his labour, the worker leads a miserable existence in which, “he does not confirm himself in his work, he denies himself, feels miserable instead of happy, deploys no free physical and intellectual energy, but mortifies his body and ruins his mind” (80).

Returning to the poem “Labor,” the opening description of the natural and timeless nature of toil established in the opening two stanzas develops into the middle section’s exposition of the debilitating nature of life as a worker under capitalism. The shift is signalled by the changed length of the stanzas. The first line of stanza three reads, “Rich indeed was my reward,” and the ellipsis at the end of the line signals a break into the worker’s dramatic criticism of the nature of the life he leads (“Labor”). The third stanza describes what Marx referred to as the mortification of the worker’s body, “Stunted soul and body scarred/ With the marks of scourge and rod.” The rhyme between the final word of the third line of stanza three, and the final word of the first line of stanza four, “rod” and “sod,” links the mortification of the worker’s body with the physical conditions of his labour, as the manifestation of his relationship to the land, “I, the tiller of the sod.” The fourth stanza provides a clear expression of the fundamental nature of the relationship of the worker-figure to the conditions of his labour, as he states that he is “a slave.” Following from this, the fifth stanza demonstrates the interrelationship between physical and social degradation, “Serving best, but served the worst,/ Starved and cheated, gouged and/ spoiled.” Breaking with the three-line stanza form, the placement of “spoiled” on a separate line in the middle of the page stands as a stark indictment of the worker’s utter ruination. Remarkably, however, this seemingly conclusive indictment does not lead to the worker’s defeat, or the cessation of labour. The sixth stanza begins, “Still I builded, still I toiled.”

This dogged persistence leads to a key expression of class consciousness in the final line of the sixth stanza, when the worker states that he continues to labour on “in the world myself had made” (“Labor”). This sentence provides a crucial moment in the poem, as it signals a shift from the worker’s earlier passive acquiescence in the condition of his labour and his alienated relationship to the external world, toward recognition of his historical agency. The poem’s initial obfuscation of the origins of the worker expresses the worker’s failure to recognise his condition of labour as the product of a specific historical development. To state that the world is something which has

been made by the worker is a conscious expression of what Marx argues is the true relationship between human labour and world history. Indeed, in “Private Property and Communism” Marx argues that “Industry is the real historical relationship of nature, and therefore of natural science, to man” (93). Discussing natural science, Marx argues that drawing a distinction between man and natural science is a “falsehood” because, if industry is the real historical relationship of man to nature, then the history of nature can be conceived of as “the open revelation of human faculties” (93). Marx debunks this “falsehood,” arguing that “Nature as it is formed in human history – the birth process of human society – is the real nature of man and thus nature as fashioned by industry is true anthropological nature, though in alienated form” (94). This leads Marx to conclude that, “The social reality of nature and human natural science of man are identical expressions” (94). Marx argues that the reason why people find it difficult to understand world history as the “creation by man of human labour and the development of nature for man” is because industry, as it exists through the social forms of labour which emerge in the capitalist mode of production, has become a force which confronts man as alien and oppressive (95).

For the worker in the poem “Labor” to say “In the world myself had made,” is therefore a significant expression of class-consciousness, which articulates a positive understanding of labour as the process through which world history exists as a product of man, and man exists as a product of human history (“Labor”). In this respect, Marx describes “the essential reality of man in nature” as being “man as the existence of nature for man, and nature for man as the existence of man” (95). The sense of a double-movement which Marx conveys here in his description of the essential relation of man to nature is reflected in the awkward grammar of the sentence “In the world myself had made.” The use of indirect speech in this sentence generates an ambiguity of meaning. The ambiguity results in two possible readings, as the sentence seems to express both the idea that the worker has made the world, and also that the world has made the worker. The sentence therefore reflects Marx’s conception of the true relation of man to world history, realised through labour. As such, this sentence provides a key expression of the worker’s conscious understanding of his relation to labour, and the world, which had been obscured by the poem’s earlier obfuscation of the historical development of labour.

Having perceived and articulated the true nature of his relationship to the world, the worker is now capable of confirming himself through his work, and thus also of more fully realising himself as man. The poem now shifts form again into a five line stanza, followed by a three line stanza. The final eight lines provide a formal counterweight to the first two stanzas, reflecting the political transformation that has occurred in this poem. Newly capable of seeing himself as the maker of himself and his world, the worker states, “Up from slavery I rise,/ Dreams and wonder in my eyes” (“Labor”). Just as the imagery here suggests that the worker’s progress takes the form of an act of rising, of surmounting servitude, Marx argues that the emancipation of the workers will involve overcoming the social forms of labour that rise up against them, leading to “the reintegration or return of man into himself, the abolition of man’s self-alienation” (89). The preposition “up” in the first line of stanza seven links back to and contrasts with the prepositional phrase “out of” in the poem’s opening line (“Labor”). The third and fourth lines of the seventh stanza typographically represent the change in the worker’s position which has occurred, with a thick black hyphen providing an ellipsis between “I was slave - but I am free:” and “I was blind – but I can see:” Importantly, this awakening is grounded in the speaker’s newly positive affirmation of his position as worker in the final line of the seventh stanza, “I, the builder, I, the maker.” The repetition of “I” between “the builder” and “the maker” again supports the idea that the worker makes himself as he makes the world.

The description of the act of rising in the seventh stanza leads into the poem’s final affirmation of the newfound power of the worker. The repetition of “I” once more at the beginning of the final stanza resounds with confidence (“Labor”). The rhyme between “maker” and “breaker” underscores the link between the final line of stanza seven, and the first line of stanza eight, as the worker’s newly liberating acts of production are shown to be linked to the simultaneous destruction of the pre-existing order. Marx argues that the proletariat exists as the result of a private property, “Private property as private property, as wealth, is compelled to maintain itself, and thereby its opposite, the proletariat, in existence” (134). Existing as a condition of private property, therefore, the proletariat “cannot free itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life” (135). Moreover, “It cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing all the inhuman conditions of life of society today which are summed up in its own situation” (135). The “calm tradition breaker,” then, expresses

the idea that the emancipation of the workers will arise as the result of an organic and inevitable process (“Labor”).

The two negative descriptions in the second line of stanza eight, “unimpassioned, unafraid” link back to and contrast with the previous description of the worker in stanza six, “undernourished, underpaid” (“Labor”). Emboldened, “Labor” ends with the worker’s concluding, powerful enunciation, “Master of the world I’ve made:” While the concluding sentence in stanza six provided an important articulation of the worker’s newly positive conception of his productive position in relation to the world, the final line of the poem as a whole expresses the political agency which the worker has now achieved. While the final line of stanza six began with a prepositional phrase, “in the,” which located the worker in relation to the world, the final line of the poem begins with a substantive noun which demonstrates the degree of political agency which the worker has now acquired, “Master.” The unusual use of a colon at the end of the poem’s final line furthermore suggests that the newly masterful position of the worker will be productive, in a way not yet envisaged. The expression of mastery here is important, as it suggests that political agency has been achieved through the elucidation and awakening of the worker’s conscious understanding of his productive relation to the world. The link in “Labor” between line three of stanza six and the poem’s final line suggests that political agency is predicated on a conscious understanding of the worker’s position within society, and the world. Similarly, Marx suggests in the concluding paragraph of “Alienation and the Proletariat” that revolutionary political transformation is predicated on the developing consciousness of the workers, as he argues that “a large part of the English and French proletariat is already conscious of its historic task and is constantly working to develop that consciousness into complete clarity” (135). Ultimately, “Labor” enacts a shift from the worker’s servitude to mastery, and shows this shift to be predicated on the worker’s conscious recognition of his productive position in relation to society and to the world.

Braley’s poem engages with the idea of the alienation of labour as outlined in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. But what significance does this poem have in relation to the collection *Poems by and for Workers* as a whole, and to poetic practice within the ILGWU more generally? Why is “Labor” a fitting poem for this ILGWU collection? The poem’s articulation of a shift from an expression of the bondage of toil to a positive expression of the worker’s consciousness of his own

political agency reflects Educational Director Mark Starr's understanding that "the pursuit of happiness depends more than ever on wiping out social illiteracy and attaining civic and political maturity" ("Why Union Education" 201). The strength of Starr's statement rests in the concise way it expresses the idea that workers' political agency is achieved through their capacity to read more lucidly the terms of their own existence, that is, to attain "social literacy." In articulating the worker's transition from a condition of servitude and alienation to a position of social mastery, "Labor" can thus be seen to articulate the overall pedagogical aim of the ILGWU's program of cultural activities. Just as literary appreciation classes offered by the ILGWU emphasised the importance of literature that allowed readers to interpret the forces of social and economic change, "Labor" dramatizes and celebrates the process through which the worker attains mastery of the social and political discourses through which his life has been conditioned. As a reworking of those discourses, the poem itself represents the product of an aesthetic labour, which challenges, rather than simply summarises and substantiates, the activity of production as an alienated process. Referring back to the poem's title then, "Labor" draws attention to itself both as the product of and an activity of production, which dramatizes the process whereby the worker comes to read and confirm himself more fully in the world. In this respect, the poem can be read as a figure for this poetry collection more generally, in that it makes available to readers the idea that the acquisition of political agency is predicated on a conscious act of interpreting and re-articulating the discourses through which workers understand their relationship to society and the world. Thus, "Labor" is a fitting poem for a collection that takes the experience of labour as its central theme, and that attempts to provide ILGWU members with the means to interpret their experiences of life and work in politically productive terms.

While, however, the material labour performed by the worker in Braley's poem remains generalised, the inclusion of Carl Sandburg's short poem "Anna Imroth" in *Poems by and for Workers* articulates an aesthetic process rooted in specific physical events. Taken from Sandburg's *Chicago Poems*, "Anna Imroth" describes the death of a young woman worker who had been trapped inside a burning factory building. The poem reads:



Cross the hands over the breast here – so.  
 Straighten the legs a little more – so.  
 And call for the wagon to come and take  
                   her home.

Her mother will cry some and so will her  
                   sisters and brothers.

But all of the others got down and they  
                   are safe and this is the only one of  
                   the factory girls who wasn't lucky in  
                   making the jump when the fire broke.

It is the hand of God and the lack of fire escapes. ("Anna Imroth")

The poem relates in simple language the circumstances of the girl's death, "this is the only one of/ the factory girls who wasn't lucky in/ making the jump when the fire broke" (*Poems by and for Workers* 9). "Anna Imroth" would have been especially poignant for ILGWU members. The poem alludes to the Triangle Factory Fire of March 25, 1911, in which 146 workers died as a result of a fire inside a New York City garment factory. The event is described in *The History of the ILGWU in Song and Poem* thus: "workers, mostly young girls, died in a fire at the Triangle Waist Company.... This company and many other shirtwaist companies had defeated the union in a long strike prior to the tragedy which shocked the country" (*History of the ILGWU* 8). The workers had been trapped because the company bosses kept the doors to the building locked in order to prevent them from leaving. The tragic event was of lasting political and cultural significance to the union, spurring action toward labour reforms and galvanizing union identity through the experience of collective suffering (Llewelyn, Zandy). Referring to victims of the Triangle Fire, *The History of the ILGWU in Song and Poem* declares that "We are indebted beyond words to these and other martyrs for their sacrifice which stirred the public conscience. We can best repay their memories by ever advancing the union" (*History of the ILGWU* 11). The inclusion of Sandburg's poem in *Poems by and for Workers* is an example of the way in which The Triangle Fire of 1911 was memorialized within the ILGWU's cultural history.

However, more than simply recounting the death of a young female factory worker, “Anna Imroth” highlights the role of aesthetic processes in affording some dignity to workers, even in death. Rather than simply witnessing the event of Anna Imroth’s death, the poem begins with a series of instructions, “Cross the hands over the breast here – so./ Straighten the legs a little more – so./ And call for the wagon to come and take/ her home” (“Anna Imroth”). As the subject of Sandburg’s address is unspecified, the instructions seem directed at the reader him/herself, inviting him or her to participate in the performance of the death rites being described. Beginning with a present-tense description of an aesthetic process, the poem calls attention to its own status as an act of artistic re-working which aims to give some dignity to the dead worker. As her death has rendered Anna Imroth unable to perform the feat of physical self-fashioning performed by the worker in Braley’s poem “Labor,” Sandburg instead invites the reader to perform the acts of physical and discursive labour required to give Anna Imroth the semblance of composure denied her by the circumstances of her work and death. The elliptical “-so” at the end of the first two lines draws attention to the poem itself as enacting an aesthetic reworking of physical debilitation, affirming to readers that this process is being performed through their own acts of imaginative labour. The poem concludes on a satirical note, as the poet declares that Anna Imroth’s death was the result of “the hand of god and the lack of fire escapes.” Sandburg here suggests that the idea of religious fate is a weak mask used to obscure and excuse the appalling circumstances of work in the garment trade. In so doing, the bathos of the final line throws into greater relief the significance of the poem’s opening assertion of an aesthetic agency grounded in specific physical processes. The “hand of God” is revealed as a false obfuscation by the crossing of the dead girl’s hands. While Braley’s poem “Labor” dramatized the role of discursive mastery in the worker’s attainment of political agency in general terms, Sandburg’s “Anna Imroth” complements this by performing an instance of such aesthetic work in relation to a specific political moment. Asking the reader directly to participate in this aesthetic process, “Anna Imroth” shows how poems could be used as political tools which would incite workers to perform their own acts of imaginative labour in relation to real events.

In my analysis of the poems “Labor” and “Anna Imroth” and in my preceding discussion of the ILGWU’s educational and cultural activities, I have argued that the idea of “social literacy” was of key importance to the union’s literary production. The

ILGWU's activities of literary production and interpretation were driven by the understanding that political progress would be predicated on the workers' increased ability to both articulate and (re)interpret the material and ideological conditions which determined their experiences. "Labor" dramatizes the process through which political agency is achieved through the awakening of class consciousness and the mastering of socio-political discourse. However, many other poems printed and distributed by the ILGWU celebrate the role of the union itself as the organisation through which this discursive mastery can be achieved. The ILGWU poetry collections considered here celebrate the role of the union as a cultural and political organisation that allows its members to imagine more fully the possibilities of their own lives, and to thereby attain greater political and cultural agency. The extent to which much of the literary material produced by the ILGWU seems to be *about* the process of cultural production which it simultaneously substantiates is, therefore, politically significant.

#### **4.5 "Ideas Plus Organisation": The ILGWU as a Political and Imaginative Force**

While "Labor" enacted a shift from a representative worker figure's servitude to mastery, the poem "Power" by Mildred Scholl on page 23 of *Poems by and for Workers* celebrates the role of the ILGWU as a force which gives workers both greater happiness and political power. Like "Labor" the title is one word which stands boldly at the top of the page, reflecting the force of the noun itself. Mildred Scholl was not a poet whose work was published elsewhere, and she was most likely a member of the ILGWU. The simple, five-line poem reads:

Our shop is different, since we have power ...  
 Strange that the union alone could give  
 Such newness to all things;  
 Strange that because of it there comes  
 A strength and power that sings. ("Power").

The poem expresses the idea that the union imparts a sense of imaginative as well as political possibility to its members, giving "such newness to all things." The abstract nature of the noun "power" is reflected in the poem as a whole, which otherwise remains vague regarding the specific mechanisms through which the union gives power to the shop. This vagueness is suggested in the ellipsis at the end of the

first line, and the repetition of “strange” at the beginning of lines two and four. As the nature of union operations within the shop remains unspecified, the union takes on almost mythical properties as a beneficent force. However, the passive construction in line four, “because of it there comes,” leads to the subsequent description of the active expression of union power, “a strength and power that sings.” Crucially, this poem expresses the idea that the importance of the union to workers was perceived as much in terms of its cultural as its political significance, as a “strength and power that sings.” The impact of the union’s power manifests itself on a collective level within individual garment trade “shops,” as the poem begins by using the collective pronouns “our” and “we.”

An understanding of the significance of the ILGWU as both a cultural and political force was articulated elsewhere in the collections. For example, in a piece entitled “In Retrospect” in *Garment Workers Speak*, Local 22 member Miriam Spicehandler discusses the role of the imagination in the success of labour organisation. Reflecting on the history of the ILGWU, Spicehandler relates the progress of the ILGWU in terms of its successful realisation of the hopes of its founding members. Spicehandler begins, “Forty years ago a small group of garment workers, with the hope for a better world in their hearts, met on New York’s lower East Side and founded the ILGWU” (22). In Spicehandler’s terms, the ILGWU progressed through its realisation of this initial store of hope, “Since that time many of the dreams they dreamed have become actualities and the organisation which they founded has become as much ‘a way of life’ as a means of improving working conditions” (22).

Spicehandler emphasises the important political function played by the imagination in times of political difficulty. Writing in 1940, Spicehandler states that “the union meets in convention (May 1940) at a time when in many parts of the world working men and women are being denied not only the means of self-improvement, but even the right to dream” (“In Retrospect” 22). In this context, Spicehandler’s retrospective discussion of ILGWU history underscores the significance of the union as an organisation which has historically allowed for the continued expression and realisation of the hope and imagination of its members. In accordance with this ethos, section V of *The History of the ILGWU in Song and Poem* entitled “Unions Were Formed To Make Men’s Dreams of a Better World Come True” states that “Men, in Their dreams of Utopia, always include the things denied them in the real world”

(*History of the ILGWU* 7). The instructions contained within this short section serve to emphasise in the minds of union members the significance of the ILGWU as the organisation which engenders hope through the realisation of past dreams. The text states “Behind the song we shall sing, THE MILL WAS MADE OF MARBLE (P.46), you can see the hopes of the early unionists” (7). Existing as the current embodiment of the hopes of the past, the text celebrates the role of the union in fostering further idealist visions of the future, “There is no doubt that the world could be improved if men and women were united. Let us sing IT COULD BE A WONDERFUL WORLD” (*History of the ILGWU* 7). This brief section indicates the way in which the ILGWU educational leadership promoted an understanding of the union as the appropriate vehicle through which the political and imaginative aspirations of its members could best be realised.

The educational activities offered by the union provide a forum for the imagination which was denied workers in other cultural spheres. In “In Retrospect” Spicehandler argues that if the union’s success will continue in the future, “working men and women in our organization and out of it must be taught to understand present day happenings in a way which neither the schools nor newspapers always present them” (22). Concluding her discussion, Spicehandler reflects on the role that the union’s educational and cultural activities play in the union more generally. Having outlined the activities such as “socials” and “sports events” available to younger members, Spicehandler concludes that “In all of these functions a spirit of cooperation, an enthusiasm for union activity is built up which is a great privilege to any organization” (22).

It is interesting to note the reflexive nature of this assertion. Spicehandler is here arguing that the union activities foster, in turn, an enthusiasm for more union activities. The reflexive nature of this argument shows that Spicehandler values the cultural function of the union in its own right. Just as the present activities described by Spicehandler exist as an actualization of the dreams of founding ILGWU members, they also foster dreams among the ILGWU youth which express the potential of a future reality. As Spicehandler argues, the present programme of activities serves as “a training ground for those who in the next generation must carry on the work of our organization” (“In Retrospect” 22).

Additionally, Spicehandler celebrates the role of the union as an imaginative force in her poem “Power of Ideas” published in *Garment Workers Speak*. The poem reads:

*POWER OF IDEAS*

Ideas plus organization have  
 Killed the microbe and conquered disease  
 Harnessed the lightning, the wind and the tides  
 Wrested minerals from the earth for a machine age  
 Annihilated space and time by plane and radio  
 Made seas the highway of commerce and linked  
     the coasts of continents  
 Rolled tyrants into the dust  
 Changed the old order to make place for new.  
 But frontiers yet remain.  
 Poverty, slums, waste, want and war  
 Challenge the dynamic liberating power of new ideas.  
 The modern pioneers call us to high adventure.  
 We, too, can forge ideas and union power together  
 To alter, assist, advance America! (“Power of Ideas”)

The poem expresses the dual understanding of the ILGWU as both a powerful organisation of labour and of ideas. The first eight lines of this fourteen-line poem expand further on the progressive, civilizing force of organized thought. Drawing on an American discourse of Manifest Destiny, Spicehandler writes that “ideas plus organization” have, moreover, “Annihilated space and time by plane and radio” and “made seas the highway of commerce and linked/ the coasts of continents” (“Power of Ideas”). However, the progress of history is not yet complete, “frontiers yet remain.” Importantly, these remaining frontiers of “Poverty, slums, waste, want and war” are not denigrated as debilitating circumstances in their own right, but because they “Challenge the dynamic liberating power of new ideas.” The poem concludes with a call to transgress these remaining frontiers through imaginative “high adventure.” The poem’s concluding two lines tie a discourse of American exceptionalism to a valorisation of the

role of the ILGWU in harnessing the dynamic power of ideas. Spicehandler urges, “We, too, can forge ideas and union power together/ To alter, assist, advance America!” Spicehandler expresses the idea that the union manifests a powerful organisational crucible in which ideas and power combine not simply to improve workers’ lives, but to advance the progress of the nation. This Progressivist link between the growth of the labour movement and the advance of the American nation is echoed in the poem “Frontiers of Freedom” by Hilda Worthington Smith, printed on page 24 of *Poems by and for Workers*. The poem reads:

Frontiers of Freedom

Sailing wide oceans, our fathers before us  
Sought for a land where a man could be free.  
Still we hear strains of their pioneer chorus  
Vibrant with hopes of a new liberty.

In remote forests their axes rang, singing;  
Leaving the coast lands they pushed toward the West.  
Over the plains rolled their great wagons, swinging;  
Home and a harvest in freedom their quest.  
Gone the deep forests and lost the wide spaces.  
Far becomes near and no longer is strange.  
Industry shatters the once-silent places.  
Mines pierce the core of the once-distant range.

Lost in the maze our machines have created,  
Freedom is stifled and hampered by fear.  
Each for himself, as in days long out-dated,  
Seeks in confusion some distant frontier.

Misty the road but secure the foundation  
Laid by those others who blazed the first trail,  
Let us rebuild now our pioneer nation  
Where living freedom for all shall prevail. (“Frontiers of Freedom”)

Like Spicehandler's poem "Power of Ideas," "Frontiers of Freedom" decries the historical process whereby the developments of modern technology and commerce have weakened the strength of America's imaginative vitality, leading to the loss of collective agency as individuals stumble dizzily through a fragmented physical and mental landscape. The poem, however, concludes with the optimistic injunction for American workers to reawaken the pioneer consciousness and rebuild the nation.

In its expression of the understanding that ideas can be utilised as a powerful political force, Spicehandler's poem "Power of Ideas" articulates a dynamic understanding of the imagination similar to that articulated by Muriel Rukeyser in *Life of Poetry* (1949) and William Carlos Williams in the essay "The Poem as a Field of Action" (1948). Both Rukeyser and Williams drew on science in order to argue for an understanding of poetry as a medium in which an exchange of energy is enacted, and which therefore holds a direct, transformative relationship with reality. However, whereas both Rukeyser and Williams locate the source of this exchange at the level of the poem itself, Spicehandler's poem argues forcefully that the true locus of imaginative power resides not at the level of the poem, but within the culture of the union as a whole. In celebrating the role of the union as an imaginative force, Spicehandler's poem both expresses and substantiates the power of ILGWU cultural production. Just as Spicehandler's argument in "In Retrospect" demonstrates her reflexive understanding of ILGWU culture as an important means of ensuring the future of ILGWU culture, "Power of Ideas" reflexively provides an individual instantiation of the culture that it simultaneously celebrates. Poems such as "Power" and "Power of Ideas" demonstrate the centrality of the union itself as the agent which ensures continuity between the hopes of the past, the circumstances of the present, and the possibilities of the future.

This idea is expressed viscerally in the concluding section of the collection *The History of the ILGWU in Song and Poem*. This concluding section to this collection commemorates the "Birthday celebration of the ILGWU" which was held in Madison Square Garden on June 13, 1957 to mark "the most recent quarter century of the Union's history and of the presidency of David Dubinsky" (*Poems by and for Workers* 15). Addressing the reader directly, the anonymously written text forcefully states, "The starved, the kicked, the beaten outcasts/ Have paved the way for you./ Their



bodies made a bridge for you to higher things./ You see around you the living union monument to/ those who fought to make a better world” (*Poems by and for Workers* 15). Literally, the union is a “living monument,” built on the foundations of the past and moving toward a better future. This description of the ILGWU as a “living union monument” expresses the idea that the union is an organic force that mediates continuously between past, present and future. Additionally, the ILGWU is also described in this section as the “Union-Mother,” expressing an idea of the union as the self-sustaining agent of its own rebirth (15). Similarly, in the short article entitled “Finding a Family” in *Garment Workers Speak*, Yetta Horn of Local 22 describes the ILGWU as a “moving force, a force which even now is pointing the way out of the dismal night into the daylight of working class solidarity!” (66). Adopting the analogy of ILGWU as family, the union becomes, for Horn, a force that unites the working-class in a shared imaginative vision of solidarity. She writes, “All of them [ILGWU members] I could never hope to personally know. Yet many I could meet and immediately be bound to by one of the strongest ties on earth – the common desire to better the world we live in” (66). In the context of these remarks, it is clear that the ILGWU cultivated an understanding among its members of the union as a dynamic cultural agent that served to unite workers together in the project of reproducing that culture.

Outlining a theoretical position which reflects the contemporary practices of the ILGWU, Ernst Bloch argues in “Marxism and Poetry” (1935) that poetry is both “an objective piece of work with material” and an elucidation of the “not yet lived possibility,” existing both as the result of a creative praxis and as the expression of a creative process which illuminates future possibility (88). Moreover, Bloch argues that the discrepancy between realised acts of cultural production and the future possibilities which these acts render apparent ensures the fundamentally productive nature of the relationship between culture and reality. Bloch argues that “it is only because of the really possible that the world is not made into a sophisticated book,” meaning that reality exists as “a process dialectically mediated, therefore dialectically open” which can never be fully represented, or contained, by art (89). At the same time, art expresses alternative ideas and visions for the future which have not yet been realised, but to which the present conditions of reality have given rise, what Bloch refers to as “an elucidated waking dream of the essential” (88). For Bloch, artistic truth is therefore

“ultimately the demonstration of tendency and latency of what has not yet developed and needs its agent” (88).

Similarly, Trent and Cheyney argue in *More Power to Poets!* (1934) that “Man’s life is a fairly constant conflict between his dreams, usually even more childish than his thoughts, and reality. Poetry is a bridge between the two, the bridge man must cross to progress. Poetry is the point of contact between dream and actuality” (14). Arguing for the practical relevance of poetry in an age in which, they describe, poetry is increasingly viewed as a “vestigial” remnant of an earlier stage of human society, Trent and Cheyney argue that “poetry is practical because it helps man mature his dreams and his achievements and the civilization which needs the seed of act and the pollen of dream to flower and fruit” (9, 15). As I discussed in Chapter 1, poetry was increasingly perceived by writers and commentators on the American Left as in danger of becoming an out-dated mode of thought and expression, surpassed by the ascendant discourses of science and psychology. However, Trent and Cheyney insist on the political efficacy of poetry in an age which has, as they put it, fallen so “far from grace and sheer horse sense” that men are no longer the authors of their own imagination, having sunk “deeper and deeper into standardized patterns of thought and feeling” (8). As I discussed earlier, Trent and Cheyney insist on the importance of poetry to an age in which the imagination itself seems to have fallen victim to capitalist modes of production, becoming fragmented and abstracted from individual minds. In the context of an increasingly circumscribed horizon of imaginative possibility, as Trent and Cheyney argue, poetry retains significance as a conduit between the circumstances of the present and the future realisation of hope, “Poetry is a breeze blowing from the future into the present” (36). Moreover, in the introduction to the 1930 edition of their poetry journal *The New Contemporary Vision and Scepter*, Trent and Cheyney, along with co-editor W.M. Sawyer, describe their vision for an American educational system in which “Every high-school and every college should have a course in the writing of verse conducted by a recognised poet,” as one of the “planks we have laid for a platform in the air” (Trent, Cheyney and Sawyer). This rhetoric demonstrates the currency of the idea among the American literary Left that poetry could be used as both a pragmatic and idealist tool to bridge the gap between reality and the imagined future, laying the foundations for a lofty cultural vision.

Spicehandler's poem "Power of Ideas" draws attention to its own status as an act of cultural production which at once realises past hope and articulates a vision of the future that emerges from the conditions of the present. Most importantly, however, the poem's key celebration of "union power" makes clear to readers that the ILGWU is the agent which will deliver a future reality which aims to be commensurate with the hopes of its members. If much of the literary material produced by the ILGWU is *about* its own process of cultural production, then, it also imparts to union members and readers a strong understanding of the importance of the union itself as the vehicle through which the aims and hopes of the union will continue to be realised. In light of Bloch's argument that art demonstrates "what has not yet developed and needs its agent," part of the function of poems like "Power of Ideas" is to emphasise the significance of the ILGWU as the political agent which will underwrite the cultural vision that the poem expresses (Bloch 88). In celebrating the role of the union as the key agent of cultural and political production within members' lives, poems such as "Power" and "Power of Ideas" work to ensure the continued success of that culture.

The celebration of the process of cultural production which is expressed in these collections is related to the material processes of labour out of which the need for the union originally arose. The poem "Labor" in *Poems by and for Workers* demonstrates that the worker's transition from a position of servitude to mastery is predicated on the parallel development of the worker's socio-political understanding. Additionally, a range of articles and poems in both *Garment Workers Speak* and *Poems by and for Workers* link the significance of the union's cultural programme to the material realities of labour and, in particular, life on the shop floor. Indeed, an article entitled "Notches" by Leo Lavender, business agent of the ILGWU's Chicago Joint Board, highlights the importance of offering expression to the myriad seemingly minor events that are, in fact, of major significance to daily work life. The article begins, "Human beings are apt to judge the value of events major or minor not by their importance to mankind, but by their relative importance to themselves" (*Garment Workers Speak* 54). Lavender then continues by decrying the role of the press in perpetuating the understanding that "world events" are more significant than the minor concerns of everyday life. He writes, "The columns of the press are seldom filled with articles dealing with minor problems affecting a given class or group of people, and it is probably no exaggeration to claim

that tradespeople are at least as much interested in their solution as they are in the solution of so-called major problems” (*Garment Workers Speak* 54).

This statement highlights the role of ILGWU publications in providing a forum in which to discuss matters of significance to workers, which would not be treated in the mainstream press. The article redresses this neglect, by providing a discussion of “notches,” marks made on fabric by “cutters” who cut cloth, which dressmakers then use as a guide when adjoining fabrics and assembling garments. Lavender adopts a wry tone, using bathos as a means of levelling the relations between world and local events. He muses, “When we consider the historical fact that the late world war was precipitated by the killing of a mere Austrian Archduke (Ferdinand) we have some conception of the extent to which so-called minor matters can aggravate a situation” (“Notches” 54). Continuing in this vein, Lavender argues that, despite the fact that “the presence or absence of a notch in the proper part of a dress may not have precipitated a world war and probably never will,” notches are indeed hugely important to the dressmakers (55). Lavender uses humour to exaggerate the contrast between “good” and “bad” notches. While every dressmaker is “in constant search” of the “noble poetic – perfectly symmetrical” notch, the “misplaced” notch can turn “many a singing dressmaker” into “a moody, disgruntled, disgusted bundle of humanity” (55). Having established the significance of notches in the garment trade, Lavender conclusively states, “Thus we have proven the significance of a seemingly minor matter, but very important to those who are concerned with it” (55).

Lavender’s use of humour and exaggeration to describe the significance of notches draws attention to the relationship between the production of textiles and texts within the ILGWU. In addition to the “noble poetic” notch, for example, Lavender describes the notch formed in a “perfectly straight line” which “dressmakers spend their nights dreaming about” and is designated the “mythical notch” (54). The “singing dressmaker” is rendered disgruntled when the notches “don’t harmonize” (54-55). The playfulness of Lavender’s language draws attention to the relationship between acts of material and cultural production and, in so doing, asserts that the quotidian circumstances of the dressmaking trade are as worthy subjects of cultural concern as the assassination of a “mere Austrian Archduke” (54). Ultimately, then, “Notches” highlights the way in which the aesthetic production of the ILGWU was developed directly in relation to the conditions of labour of its members. Moreover, the inclusion

of “Notches” within *Garment Workers Speak* demonstrates that the ILGWU Educational Department was happy to disclose the social and material conditions on which its cultural production was based.

The article in *Garment Workers Speak*, “Why I Became An Active Union Member” by ILGWU member Imelda Santerre further substantiates the idea that the union’s cultural programme emerges directly from the conditions of labour experienced by garment workers. Initially reluctant to join the union, Santerre explains that participating in a strike convinced her of the benefits of organisation. Concluding her article, Santerre states that today she is “active in all phases of union work – in the shop, in educational work and on committees” (43). “But most of all,” she continues, “I want to write. You may be sure that my writing will always have a purpose – the ideal of a happier and freer life for every worker” (43). Santerre’s article demonstrates the way in which she understood the union’s programme of cultural activities as directly related to the conditions of labour in the garment trade. Furthermore, Santerre expresses her recognition that the political agency afforded to members through their participation in the union also entails the responsibility to work toward the continuation of that culture. Describing her experience of joining the ILGWU, Santerre writes “gradually I found out that the Union was not magic at all. I learned that it was only a means of holding people together, the means through which workers exercise their own strength ... now we saw that we ourselves were the power of the organisation” (43). Describing her experience in terms of the demystification of the idea of the union as “magic,” Santerre makes clear that participating in the union increased her sense of political agency and collective responsibility. Importantly, this increased agency in turn fosters Santerre’s desire to write, to contribute to the development of a collective, idealist imagination. In this respect, “Why I Became an Active Union Member” presents a clear narrative link between the conditions of labour, which prompted the strike, and ILGWU culture.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

In conclusion, just as the poem “Labor” expresses the development of economic and political agency in terms of an increased interpretative insight and ability to re-articulate the discourses through which the worker understands his position in the world, the poems which I have discussed here aim to increase the political agency of union members by allowing them to recognise, express and build upon the importance of the union within their lives. Aiming to build a new culture, poems and articles

included in the collections *Poems by and for Workers* and *Garment Workers Speak* demonstrate the way in which the ILGWU Educational department used poetry as a means of fostering class consciousness and building union solidarity. The bibliographic nature of the texts and articles such as “Notches” disclose the rootedness of ILGWU literary production in the conditions of labour of its members, and thereby exemplify an educational culture in which literature was studied alongside economics and labour relations, contributing to the overall “social literacy” of its members. Moreover, by demonstrating the social and material conditions through which its literary production was carried out, the ILGWU imparted to its members the capacity to participate in the continuous re-creation of the union’s culture. The poetry and educational materials of the ILGWU which I have discussed in this chapter were produced during a time in which the imagination itself was perceived to be under threat from developments within modern capitalism. However, the work I have discussed demonstrates an understanding among union members and poets that the role of poetry within working-class America would be ensured only in the extent to which it engaged consciously with the conditions of its own production, allowing workers to re-appropriate the imaginative faculties which were being increasingly wrested from their minds by external forces. Ultimately, the “march toward the dawn” proclaimed in the ILGWU anthem involved both political and creative activities of production. The poems I have discussed here were harnessed by the union as a means of both substantiating and working to further the ILGWU as a cultural and political organisation. In so doing, they aimed at providing a means of bridging the distance referred to by Trent and Cheyney as existing between “Utopia” and “the next meal”; between reality and its latent imaginative possibilities (*More Power to Poets* 67).

## Chapter 5: The Lyric *Justice* Poetry of Miriam Tane

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on the work of poet Miriam Tane. Over one hundred of Tane's poems were published in the ILGWU's fortnightly newspaper, *Justice*, between 1939 and 1946. One of eight children, Tane was born in New York on the June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1916. Her parents had earlier emigrated from Poland and settled in Manhattan. Tane attended high school in New York City, and later briefly attended Hunter College, before leaving at the age of twenty to enter the labour movement. In 1936, Tane joined Local 22 of the ILGWU, where she participated in its large and active Educational Department. In 1946, she formally left the labour movement and married Mitchell Siporin, an artist and illustrator of the Left (Marsh "*Justice* Poetry").

No edition of Tane's work has ever been published. More generally, the role played by poetry in the American trade union movement in the early decades of the twentieth century has thus far been little examined and little understood. The reasons for the lack of investigation and insight into the social function played by poetry within the American labour movement are similar to those which I discussed in my earlier chapters on Muriel Rukeyser, Genevieve Taggard and to ILGWU poetry collections. To re-iterate, much of the poetry of the American Left of the early twentieth century has been forgotten as a result of the post-war New Critical paradigm which enjoyed enduring success in its effort to isolate the interpretation of poetry from any broader socio-political enquiry and the lack of attention to class within literary scholarship. Needless to say, literary scholars have not commonly looked to trade union archives as a suitable source of literary enquiry. Likewise, few labour historians have been attentive to the role played by literature within specific unions.

Following the work of Cary Nelson in the 1980s, however, the work of Michael Denning, Barbara Foley, Walter Kalaidjian and Alan Wald has been instrumental in recovering the poetry of the American Left. This critical project has been significant not only in terms of the scope of the work uncovered, but also in the extent to which this process of recovery has made possible a fuller understanding of the social function that poetry, as a genre, has historically played in American society. John Marsh describes the project begun two decades ago by Nelson as, ultimately, no less than an attempt to

“write the history of a genre (in this case poetry) in the period between the two world wars.” (“Auto Writers”) In carrying on this project, Marsh has produced the first anthology of American labour poetry in which twelve of Tane’s poems have been published, and he has also produced the sole critical article on her work thus far. This chapter is indebted to this work. However, the extent of the work that remains to be done in uncovering the poetry of the American labour movement thus reflects the degree to which our understanding of the history of poetry as a genre remains impoverished.

Examining the role of poetry in terms of specific social movements not only allows for an analysis of the relationship between individual poems and the political context of their publication, but also provides the groundwork for an enriched understanding of the historical relationship between poetry and American political culture more generally. If trade unions have been overlooked as a field of literary enquiry, it is because the disciplinary parameters that govern the contemporary study of trade unionism are far removed from the aesthetic concerns that continue to dominate the study of literature, and poetry in particular.

As I have argued in earlier chapters, to evaluate political poetry solely in aesthetic terms fails to challenge the claims which such poetry made not only to change people’s views of self and society, but to effect political change. In acknowledging the validity of evaluating the poetry of the Left in terms of its efficacy in changing people’s view of the relationship of self to society, an examination of how writers on the Left engage with the lyric mode becomes an issue of central importance. How do writers on the American Left use poetry as a means of articulating an understanding of identity that goes against the bourgeois individualism supported by the dominant tradition of lyric poetry? Despite the importance of this issue, Cary Nelson’s “Introduction” to *Edwin Rolfe – Collected Poems*, remains the sole example within scholarship of the American literary Left to address this issue directly (1-55). Tane’s poetry, like Rolfe’s, raises important questions regarding the relationship of poetics to selfhood and society. As I will go on to discuss, her work directly addresses problems of identity, and relates the issue of self-expression to questions of consumerism, social identity, and also to a more abstract understanding of subjective consciousness. In this first part of the chapter, I discuss Tane’s critical engagement with the question of poetry’s relation to the politics of self-understanding. In constructing this argument, I will focus on those poems that best illustrate the political understanding of self-identity which Tane develops. My



analysis will centre on the poems, “Stitching Machine,” published July 1, 1939, “Identity,” published October 1, 1940, “Evacuation,” published October 1, 1939, and “Self Mood,” published April 15, 1941. In focussing my attention on these poems, I have had to exclude many others of the formally and thematically wide-ranging poems of Tane’s published in *Justice* from my discussion. However, the question of labour poets’ engagement with lyric expression is of central importance in developing a fuller understanding that poetry has historically played in the negotiation and construction of identity.

My discussion of Tane’s treatment of lyric expression will be informed by my previous discussion of this issue in relation to the work of Genevieve Taggard and *New Masses*. However, I will also draw on the work of late twentieth century thinkers such as Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Louis Althusser and Emmanuel Levinas in analysing the literary, philosophical, and political significance of Tane’s work. Again, I acknowledge the value of Marsh’s initial use of Marcuse’s work as offering insight into Tane’s poetic strategies. I bring Tane’s poetry into dialogue with a range of perspectives in order to investigate fully the significance of her engagement with the lyric tradition.

In my previous analysis of Taggard’s work, I argued that her poetry and critical writing made explicit and chimed in with a critique of bourgeois subjectivity evident within the poetics and publishing practices of the Communist Left more widely. As I argued, the work of poets such as Taggard and Edwin Rolfe launched a deliberate attack on what the former referred to as “the false principle of the individual.” In their view, this attack on individual subjectivity and a dominant tradition of lyric expression uncomplicated by any historical or political understanding was a necessary precursor to the establishment of an alternative poetics conducive to the realisation of collective class consciousness. As Rolfe stated in his 1931 poem “Credo,” “To welcome multitudes – the miracle of deeds/ performed in unison – the mind must first renounce the fiction of the self” (59).

In this respect, the literary critique of the “fiction of the self” advanced by Taggard and present within the poetics of *New Masses*, anticipates a later Marxist critique of lyric expression advanced most famously by Theodor Adorno in his 1957 essay “On Lyric Poetry and Society” (In saying that this work “anticipates” a later Marxist development, I should also here briefly point out that revisiting the work of the 30s Left in turn allows for a fuller appreciation of the history of Marxist thought.) As I mentioned in the previous chapter, in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels drew

on Hegel's historicization of the process of self-conception in order to articulate an idea of subjectivity removed from any essentialist or trans-historical quality. In "On Lyric Poetry and Society," Adorno applies Marx's concept of the historicization of the subject to literature and argues that lyric poetry is born of a social pressure to maintain a bourgeois, idealized, trans-historical conception of identity. He argues, "the demand that the lyric world be virginal, is itself social in nature ... the lyric work of art's withdrawal into itself, its self-absorption, its detachment from the social surface, is socially motivated behind the author's back" (Adorno 344, 347). Adorno attacks a tradition of reading lyric poetry as a cultural formation that successfully masks the historical and material processes through which identity is constructed. Adorno argues that what we regard as being, the greatest lyric works in our language, owe their quality to the force with which the "I" creates the illusion of nature emerging from alienation." (345). The same social pressure that works behind the author's back to develop a virginal lyricism, therefore, works in the mind of the reader to interpret this poetry as an escape from "the weight of material existence," evoking "the image of a life free from the coercion of reigning practices, of utility, of the relentless pressures of self-preservation" (344). At the same time, Adorno writes, the "elevation of the liberated subject" to a transcendent metaphysical plane is also "its degradation to something exchangeable, to something that exists merely for something else; the shadow-side of personality is the, 'So who are you?'" (346). In respect of this argument, it is apparent that the cultural force that works toward the "elevation of the liberated subject" is fundamentally implicated in capitalist relations of production; identity is itself amenable to a process of exchange.

Against this, Adorno offers a dialectical reading of lyric poetry as "the subjective expression of a social antagonism" (348). That is, he puts forward a reading of lyric poetry as a form governed by a fundamental tension between the lyric "I" and the dehumanising ideological and material conditions present to the reality against which the "I" is defined. Adorno argues, "their [lyric works] pure subjectivity, the aspect of them that appears seamless and harmonious, bears witness to its opposite, to suffering in an existence alien to the subject and to love for it as well – indeed, their harmoniousness is actually nothing but the mutual accord of this suffering and this love" (348). The more the subject struggles to differentiate itself in relation to society, the more it reveals the ideological preconditions of this society; preconditions which provide the impetus for the drive toward an idealized ipseity. In Adorno's words, "the

lyric spirit's idiosyncratic opposition to the superior power of material things is a form of reaction to the reification of the world, to the domination of human beings by commodities" (345).

In her concern to debunk the “false principle of the individual,” Taggard’s work anticipates Adorno’s concern to critique a bourgeois literary tradition that maintains an idea of the subject divorced from any broader social understanding. However, in attacking the false principle of the individual, Taggard’s work ultimately does more to critique the end result of the ideological and material conditions that maintain bourgeois individualism, than it does to identify and critique the dialectical nature of the cultural processes through which this end result is achieved. In this respect, the importance of Adorno’s essay lies in the clarity and force with which he outlines the nature of lyric poetry as the expression of antagonistic social forces. However, as I will go on to show, the poetry that Tane published in *Justice* anticipates Adorno’s concern to expose the nature of identity as an illusion produced as a result of ideological and material necessity. At the same time, as I will show, her poetry at once identifies and resists the bourgeois discursive processes which Adorno identified as elevating the subject to a position of exchangeability.

## 5.2 Tane's Lyric *Justice* Poems

Published in the July 1, 1939 edition of *Justice*, the poem “Stitching Machine” offers a stark exposure of the way in which the identity of workers in a garment factory is inextricably linked to the material conditions of their working environment. The title of the poem immediately draws the reader in to the setting and context of the poem. Yet, the lack of the definite article suggests that the subject of the poem will also have more general application. The first stanza of the poem reads

Back-bone hooked to sweat-browned  
 chairs  
 Inseparable as wounds to flesh and  
 tears,  
 Imprisoned like cloth between hand  
 and shears,  
 leashed to blind machines (like hu-  
 man hounds) –  
 spluttering  
 Esperanto of electric sounds. (“Stitching Machine”)

Clearly, the formal typography of this stanza mimics the mechanical operation, the inward/outward movement of the poem replicating that of the stitching machine. The initial line establishes this poem's key conflation of the body with the physical objects of the factory. Coming immediately after the titular mention of a "stitching machine," "back-bone" provides an immediate rhetorical correlation between mechanical and human physicality. The plosive assonance of "Back-bone" establishes a sense of the tough physical environment of the garment factory. Further, the hyphenation of "back-bone" typographically represents the process of conjoining which the initial line as a whole expresses. Positioned in the middle of the opening line, the verb "hooked" offers further rhetorical support to the idea that the physical and mechanical are being forcibly conjoined, and this is carried forward in the final phrase of the first line, "sweat-browned," a phrase that uses the physical processes of the human body to describe an external physical object. And yet, reference to the object itself is delayed until the next line, rendering the predication of the verb "hooked" ambiguous. Breaking off onto its own line, "chairs" becomes typographically as much the subject of this sentence as its formal grammatical object. This initial obfuscation of the poem's subject is reinforced throughout the remainder of the opening stanza; the significance of the subject becomes lost under the oppressive weight of the subsequent verbs, "imprisoned," "leashed." That the subject becomes lost in this opening stanza is suggestive of a loss of human agency in the midst of industrial processes; the grammar is subtly supportive of the stated social critique. The personification of "blind machines" further reinforces the debilitating confusion between human and mechanical labour.

Tane's description of the noise of the machines as an "Esperanto of electric sounds" is particularly interesting when considered in the context of the ILGWU. As discussed in my previous chapter on the educational and literary culture of the ILGWU, between 1935 until 1960 the Educational Director of the ILGWU was Mark Starr, who also headed the world Esperanto movement (Tyler 200). *Justice* ran articles which propounded the values of Esperanto. Indeed, in the early twentieth century, Esperanto was seized upon by both the British and American labour movements as a potentially useful tool in the building of international labour solidarity. As The Executive Committee of The British League of Esperantist Socialists stated in their 1923 pamphlet, "Esperanto and Labour," "Delegates have shouted 'Workers of the world, unite!' in a dozen different tongues, when it would have been obviously more effective

if the appeal were made in one common tongue” (“Esperanto and Labour”). Initially suggestive of a cacophony, then, the line “Esperanto of electric sounds” can also be read in terms the articulation of a resistance to the industrial processes from which this noise is generated. Yet, importantly, the promotion of Esperanto by leaders of the international labour movement was driven by a concern to develop administrative efficiency, as well as worker solidarity. The British League of Esperantist Socialists develop their argument thus, “The International Labour Office of the League of Nations, from a census of its letters taken in 1922, found that in all 19 languages were used by the 75 nations, that contributed to its post-bag.” The bulging post-bag, they continue, “well indicates the problem as it exists in practice. Efficiency and economy demand a newer and a better way. Labour must for its international purposes use Esperanto.” The nature of Esperanto as a radical force is compromised because its spread was driven by the same pressures of efficiency that govern the industrial processes which the labour movement was attempting to resist. Read in this context, Tane’s phrase seems double-edged, sounding a dis-harmonious relationship between industrial mechanization and the expression of worker resistance.

The second stanza reads:

Held tightly, as needle points of  
   steel,  
 impelled  
 propelled by the constant whirling  
   wheel  
 grips loose edges in unbreaking  
   seams –  
 seaming as if in un waking dreams. (“Stitching Machine”)

The dizzying form of the second stanza shuttles the reader’s eyes back and forth, rendering the process of reading this poem inseparable from the mechanical process being described. However, the position and rhyme of “steel” and “wheel” here provides a centrifugal thrust to the poem’s language and form; the structural demands of the factory process maintain a rigid imposition on the stanza’s otherwise wayward typography.

The final two lines of this stanza make explicit the poet’s concern to foreground the relationship between literary form, the mechanical process, and the structuring of the

workers' consciousness itself. The mention of "edges," referring ostensibly to edges of material, causes the reader to reflect on the relationship between mechanical and literary form, as attention is drawn to the "edges" of the enjambed lines. The use of the negative "unbreaking" implies, once more, a tacit resistance to the iron grip of the factory process. This resistance is further reinforced by the enjambment between "unbreaking" and "seams," in that the formal organisation directly breaks through the unbroken material described. The repetition of "seams -/ seaming" makes evident Tane's intentional pun, in which the "seaming" of material is linked to the state of the workers' processes of mental perception, their "unwaking dreams." "Seaming," then, can be read as an active verb, the workers' re-produce an ideologically determined system of perception at the same time as they manufacture clothing. While Adorno argued that the greatest lyric works owe their "pure subjectivity" to "the aspect of them that appears seamless," Tane playfully exposes the seams of both the poem, and those of the workers' consciousness (Adorno 348). Moreover, the phrase "unwaking dreams" clearly suggests the state of alienation that the garment workers experience in relation to their labour. The rhyme between "unbreaking seams" and "unwaking dreams" further reinforces the connection between poetic form, mechanical process and workers' consciousness.

From within the pages of a trade union newspaper, Tane causes the reader to reflect on the complicity of the relationship between poetic form and capitalist social formations. In this respect, she offers an indirect critique of high modernist ideas of efficiency in poetry, speaking particularly to Ezra Pound's command to "To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" when writing Imagist poetry. At a time when ideas of mechanical efficiency influenced American art, Tane's poem critiques the relationship between time and capitalist ideology. The third and fourth stanzas of the poem read:

To the living riveted to compliance  
 like Earth to –  
 space, to those who know no need  
                   of defiance –  
 What is Time? - to the seamstresses  
 and seamsters  
 of the world's sundry trousers and dresses?

A stitching machine, - almost like  
 to themselves  
 grinding out pieces of time, like  
 stitches – driven by the mind’s slow power,-  
 with winding thread, - second, min-  
 ute, hour . . . (“Stitching Machine”)

The initial line of the third stanza, “To the living riveted to compliance” continues the idea established in the first two stanzas, of labour as a form of bondage. Beginning notably with an indefinite article, the opening of the third stanza signals a shift to a wider, relational analysis of garment workers’ labour. The verb “riveted” again highlights the mechanical inflection of the workers’ servitude.

And yet, the living are here riveted to nothing concrete. Instead, Tane demonstrates the nature of workers’ servitude as a process governed ultimately by ideological, as much as material determinations; the living are riveted to “compliance,” an abstract noun. The poem demonstrates the way in which the abstract ideology that governs labour processes is presented to the workers as a form of natural law; a social formation that is as natural and inevitable as the relationship of “Earth to/ space.” Yet, the complicity of this relational understanding is challenged abruptly on the fifth line with the direct question, “What is Time?” The question is posed in an ellipsis, disrupting the otherwise easy progression of earth to space, seamstresses to seamsters. If, as Adorno argued, lyric poetry is a form of reaction to the reification of the world, Tane’s poem here signals the need to challenge articulations of social identity that merely react to “the domination of human beings by commodities” (345). Instead of striving to lend the garment workers’ voice to a reactionary lyricism, Tane directly identifies and questions one of the key abstractions that lies behind an increasingly reified social experience. Interestingly, this concern to wrest ideas from the processes of commodification with which they are implicated is expressed elsewhere in the edition of *Justice* in which this poem is published. In a review of *Democracy Works* (1939) by Arthur Garfield Hays, fellow member of Local 22 Miriam Spicehandler argues, “The free market in ideas upon which democracy rests must be saved from the fate that has overtaken the free market in commodities,” referring here to the threat of

monopolisation. Printed on the same page as “Stitching Machine,” both Spicehandler’s review and Tane’s poem express a concern to critique the reification of experience under capitalism, and instead offer democratic insight into the foundational ideas upon which capitalism rests.

In “Stitching Machine,” Tane demonstrates the way in which time, an ostensibly abstract concept, has become inseparable from the capitalist processes of production to which it lends structure and discipline. As E. P. Thompson argued in *Customs in Common*, the development of modern industrial capitalism was intrinsically linked to the development of horology. Discussing the development of “the clock,” Thompson argues that “The small instrument which regulated the new rhythms of industrial life was at the same time one of the more urgent new needs which industrial capitalism called forth to energise its advance” (*Customs in Common* 369). Technological progress within the art of clock-making advanced the spread of industrial capitalism, by making the measurement of time more accessible and accurate. However, as Thompson argues, this technological development was itself linked to developments within capitalist ideology, which from the seventeenth century onward drew increasingly on a bourgeois, Protestant insistence on a “moral critique of idleness” (391). The success of this critique relied on it being internalised by the labouring population. Discussing the English Puritan theologian Richard Baxter, Thompson writes, “Long before the pocket watch had come within reach of the artisan, Baxter and his fellows were offering to each man his own interior moral time-piece” (391).

While in the third stanza, Tane brings into view and causes us to question the nature of Time as a foundational abstraction, the fourth stanza expresses the idea that the production of material goods under capitalism is a process which simultaneously reproduces the ideological relations of production. In the fourth stanza, Tane uses ellipsis as a device to set up a clear comparative analogy between the production of the stitching machine and of the workers, “themselves.” The workers are “grinding out pieces of time, like/ stitches,” a line that is remarkable for the acuity and concision with which it expresses the relationship between ideological and material production. Here, the workers are not expending time, they are actively reproducing it. The reproduction of an abstract concept, “time,” is described as analogous to the material production of “stitches.” In this respect, “Stitching Machine” offers an early poetic expression of the idea later formulated in theoretical terms by Althusser when he argues that “ideology has a material existence” (“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”). Elaborating



on this idea, Althusser argues that where an individual is concerned, “the existence of his belief is material in that his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject.” In these terms, material production under capitalism simultaneously reproduces the existing ideological relations of production. In this case, “time,” as a concept fundamental to the working of capitalism is reproduced by workers at the same time as they produce material goods. The beliefs internalised by the worker under capitalism in turn provide the basis for the reproduction of the ideology from whence these beliefs derive. In Tane’s words, the process of “grinding out pieces of time, like/ stitches” is “driven by the mind’s slow/ power.” In a later poem, “Morning,” published August 1, 1940, Tane expresses a frustrated desire to put a stop to this process, wishing that she could “snatch morning from the sleeping city’s step” and “banish the clock unloading/ the inert clattering hour.”

While at the beginning of the fourth stanza of “Stitching Machine” the relationship between material and ideological production had been presented in the form of an analogy, the stanza concludes by transcribing this relationship in terms of a direct metaphorical relationship, “with winding thread, - second, min-/ ute, hour....” The conclusion of the poem makes clear the interminable, self-perpetuating nature of this process. Tane writes, “stitching for the living’s never done!” Ultimately, “Stitching Machine” renders evident the way in which workers’ consciousness is mediated and structured by the ideological and industrial conditions under which they operate, and which they work to reproduce. Despite voicing a preliminary critique of one of the key abstractions that contributes to the ongoing development and functioning of capitalism – namely, time - the overall significance of the poem lies in the acuity and concision with which it demonstrates the debilitating nature of the relationship between capitalist ideology, material production, and worker identity. Furthermore, Tane’s formal experimentation in the poem causes the reader to reflect on the role that poetic discourse can play in either unsettling or maintaining this binding relationship. Finally, “Stitching Machine” makes clear the need to move beyond the reductive poetics of capitalist discourse.

In the poem “Identity,” printed in the October 1, 1940 edition of *Justice*, Tane signals a rejection of dominant modes of identity construction, and voices a tentative questioning of the possibility of alternative forms of being. The title of the poem makes

Tane's concern with the issue of identity and lyric expression explicit. The poem begins:

There is a coffin darkness  
in the street,  
and the rain falls forbidden  
from a nowhere sky.

Like an old black cat  
an ancient man  
in a velvet skull cap  
crosses the street.

The night seems limitless  
as if it were the whole of time. ("Identity")

Tane's work is notable among trade union poets for her occasional use of surreal imagery and highly abstract metaphors. While her use of surreal imagery could be dismissed as contrived, the opening of "Identity" demonstrates the way in which Tane uses surreal imagery as an efficient means of signalling a movement into a discursive site removed from the everyday prose of the surrounding newspaper articles. The morbidity of the opening stanza signals an annulment of any conventional notion of identity that has been introduced to the mind of the reader upon reading the poem's title. The line "the rain falls forbidden/ from a nowhere sky" suggests the transgressive nature of this otherworldly space. Following this, the anthropomorphism and description of crossing in the second stanza contributes to the sense that we, as readers, are being transported elsewhere, into a space anterior to both *Justice* and also to our conventional understanding of "identity."

The third stanzaic couplet signals a rejection of the reification of the world similar to that present in "Stitching Machine." Time is expanded back to its original abstraction, and so here the world is no longer delimited by a material appropriation of time as a structuring principle of capitalist reality. Having said this, a question is raised as to the relationship between this couplet and the issue of "Identity" posited by the poem's title. In other words, what happens to identity when it becomes possible to conceive "the whole of time"? The work of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is helpful in attempting to unpack the implications of Tane's stark, enigmatic couplet. I

will provide a brief outline of some of the key ideas of Levinas' work before then using these ideas to elucidate the significance of the sentence, "The night seems limitless/ as if it were the whole of time."

A key contribution of Levinas' work is his development of a thesis of "ethics as first philosophy," that is, the idea that philosophical problems of ontology and epistemology are subordinate to the ethics of being. Indeed, Levinas concludes his essay "Ethics as First Philosophy" by stating "That is the question of the meaning of the being: not the ontology of the understanding of that extraordinary verb, but the ethics of its justice. The question *par excellence* or the question of philosophy. Not 'Why being rather than nothing?', but how being justifies itself" (86). At the heart of Levinas' exploration of the ethics of being lies his emphasis on the primacy of the encounter of being with "the other." For Levinas, the metaphysical foundation of the "freedom" and "autonomy" of the individual is problematic because it relies on "the reduction of the other to the same, the conquest of being by man over the course of history." For Levinas, "this reduction does not represent some abstract schema; it is man's ego" (*Collected Philosophical Papers* 48). The problematic nature of the ethics of being is made clear in Levinas' description of the freedom of the human ego in terms of possession and dominance. In "Ethics as First Philosophy" he describes being as "an activity which *appropriates* and *grasps* the otherness of the known" (76).

In his seminal work *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas elaborates on the relationship between subjectivity and time, in terms of this central encounter of being to the other. Levinas writes, "A being independent of and yet at the same time exposed to the other is a temporal being: to the inevitable violence of death it opposes its time, which is postponement itself" (224). In Levinas' terms, time is a "position with regard to death," a position which is a form of *détente* or "postponement by virtue of which nothing is definite yet, nothing consummated, skill which finds for itself a dimension of retreat there where the inexorable is imminent" (224). Time, for Levinas, at once limits and defines the being in relation to the other and to death, but it is this strategic limitation that constitutes the freedom of the subject. For Levinas, "It is not finite freedom that makes the notion of time intelligible; it is time that gives a meaning to the notion of finite freedom" (224). However, Levinas' discussion of the role of "time" in giving meaning to "finite freedom," should be read in the context of his wider project to call into question the ethical justification of freedom itself.

Time, as a position towards death which confers being with a finite freedom is a delimitation that constitutes the terms of subjective identity. Time is a limitation that imposes structural definition on an otherwise unmediated totality, constituting the “finite freedom” of each individual subject. Levinas argues, “Limitation is not of itself violence. Limitation is conceivable only within a totality where the parts mutually define one another. Definition, far from doing violence to the identity of the terms united into a totality, ensures this identity” (*Totality and Infinity* 222). Identity is constituted by the limitation of time, and the subject is endowed with a finite freedom. Importantly, however, as Levinas points out, this conception of totality as structured by “an antagonism of forces” and “a pluralism of wills” stands in opposition to a concept of totality occupied by beings “susceptible of being integrated into a totality”; that is, a totality free of structural limitations. As Levinas writes, “What one is tempted to call antagonism of forces presupposes a subjective perspective” (222). Conversely, a subjective perspective, or normative concept of identity, is denied by a totality uninflected by limitations, in which this antagonism of forces is lacking. Crucially, the possibility of ethical resistance to what Levinas refers to as the “irresistible imperialism of the same and the I” is achieved through contemplation of “infinity,” as an experience that is “absolutely other” to being, manifested in “the absolute resistance which by its apparition, its epiphany, it opposes to all my powers” (*Collected Philosophical Papers* 55). In summary, Levinas argues, “Ethical resistance is the presence of epiphany” (55). Returning to Tane’s couplet, then, the act of comparing a “limitless” night sky with “the whole of time” can be read as a refusal to recognise the limitations through which subjectivity is constructed. To pause here, with this poem under the limitless night sky and to compare it to the “whole of time” is to affect a temporary but effective resistance to the terms by which subjective identity is constituted. Indeed, night features elsewhere in Tane’s poetry as a trope that signifies a space that exceeds and resists the limitations of capitalist ideology, as in the May 1, 1940 poem “Night on 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue” which begins by comparing night to “a dollar bill leftover/ after debtor meets creditor.” If “Stitching Machine” demonstrated the need to move beyond the reductive poetics of capitalist discourse, this couplet holds out temporarily against the determination of subjective experience itself. Here, I should stress that Tane is not attacking the principle of individualism *per se*, only that she critiques and resists a particular ideological determination of subjective identity. While in her essay “Romanticism and Communism” Taggard was concerned to belittle and attack the principle of individual

identity, Tane here articulates a preliminary resistance to the ideological and discursive terms through which subjective identity is constituted under capitalist ideology.

However, the poem shifts markedly in the fourth stanza. In contrast to the surreal imagery employed in the opening stanza, the fourth stanza transports the reader back to everyday reality. We read:

Though I answer daily  
the postman's ring,  
and fill out information  
blanks with accuracy,  
I am without will,  
mindless as a revolving door,  
and I walk through the night  
without identity. ("Identity")

Notably for a poem entitled "Identity," the first use of "I" occurs here, in the poem's eleventh line. The poem returns to a normative idea of individual identity; the prior resistance here concedes to the formal demands of lyric expression. Clearly, however, this stanza expresses Tane's sense of alienation from the conditions of everyday life. The first four lines of the stanza demonstrate the speaker's perfunctory concession to the demands of daily life under capitalism. The construction of self-identity, or the expression of "I," is shown to be contingent upon the speaker's response to the material demands of capitalist ideology. The postman, as a bearer of information, must be responded to. In turn, personal information must be provided in order to maintain an accurate physical and discursive positioning of the subject to which the postman's ring has been addressed. The use of the word "blanks" to describe the information forms tacitly suggests that, in fact, individual identity does not exist independently of or, indeed, prior to the ideological and material processes through which it is constructed.

In this respect, the stanza illustrates the double movement in the relationship between the subject and ideology identified by Althusser in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." Althusser argues that, "the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of constituting individuals as subjects." For Althusser, the functioning of all ideology "lies in the interaction of this double constitution," "ideology being nothing but its functioning in the material forms of existence of that functioning." He describes the

process through which subjects are simultaneously constitutive of and constituted by ideology as a form of “hailing” or “interpellation.” While the first four lines of the stanza show the speaker responding to the “hailing” of the postman’s ring, the latter four lines express a sense of alienation from the interpellative process which this summons signifies. Alienated from yet conditioned by the interpellative functioning of everyday capitalism, the speaker occupies a subjective position devoid of agency, “without will.”

The metaphorical image, “mindless as a revolving door” presents an interesting figuration of identity in terms of space and movement. Returning briefly to the work of Levinas, his description of identity in terms of “imperialism” consciously draws on Heidegger’s discussion of being in terms of a correspondence between mental and physical space. In his use of the term *Dasein* to refer both to the human being and to the type of being that humans have, Michael Inwood notes that Heidegger “stresses the root meaning of the noun, namely, ‘being there’ or ‘being here’” (22). Querying the ethics of being, Levinas asks, “My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun’, my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man who I have already oppressed or starved”? (“Ethics” 82). “The ego,” for Levinas, is “the very crisis of the being of a being” because its establishment entails an ethically unjustified movement, “the laying down by the ego of its own sovereignty,” which involves “the usurpation of someone else’s place” (85). Returning to the poem, then, what relationship between “Identity” and movement does the line, “mindless as a revolving door” present? A revolving door is a device that effects a linear displacement while its own movements remain pivoted around a stationary axis. What distinguishes them from conventional doors, is that the movement of the device does not correspond to the movements that it makes possible. Mindlessness is here presented as a state in which the ego fails to perform a movement that corresponds to an imperial ontology, an ontology which grants the ego freedom in the form of individual agency. Following this, the concluding two lines of the fourth stanza clearly express the alienated status of Tane’s speaking subject, “and I walk through the night/ without identity.” The mention of “night” relates back to the couplet earlier discussed. Now, however, the night is no longer contemplated as a limitless whole that provides a framework of resistance to normative subjectivity. Instead, infinity is trampled through by a subject that can no longer recognise itself. In its expression of alienation, “Identity” here wholly subverts the lyric expectations established in the poem’s title. The political implications of this

literary subversion are intriguing. As Marcuse makes clear in *One-Dimensional Man*, alienation is a prerequisite of social critique, and thus of social change. Indeed, *One-Dimensional Man* is an extended lament for the loss of the critical perspective afforded by the alienated subject. He writes, “the concept of alienation seems to become questionable when individuals identify themselves with the existence that is imposed upon them” (13). This leads to a situation in which “there is only one dimension and it is everywhere and in all forms” and so, then, “the achievements of progress defy ideological indictment” (13). In this respect, in charting and giving expression to the alienation of the subject under capitalism, the fourth stanza of Tane’s “Identity” lays the preliminary groundwork for the articulation of an alternative poetics and politics of being.

However, this poetics has not yet been envisaged. The poem’s conclusion makes a direct appeal for an alternative model of the poetics and politics of being to manifest itself, while acknowledging that this may take some time. We read:

When will you call  
my name to me?  
When will I know  
your name?

I wait for our identity. (“Identity”)

Having charted a movement in which the speaker of the poem has become alienated from its own identity as a lyric subject, these concluding lines make an appeal for an alternative poetics of identity founded on a model of exchange. Subverting lyric convention in which the poem explicates the identity of a subject whose presence is taken for granted, Tane here presents a poetics in which identity is constructed in relation with that of the other. In subverting lyric convention, “Identity” speaks directly against a more essentialist understanding of identity expressed in the review of Langston Hughes’ *The Big Sea – An Autobiography* published immediately next to the poem on this page of *Justice*. While expressing a clear admiration for Hughes, Spicehandler’s review defines the success of Hughes’ life and work in terms of essentialist notions of race, arguing that he “represents the finest development of the Negro intellectual” (Rev. of *The Big Sea*). Indeed, the review is accompanied by a

cartoon image of Hughes straddling the oceans, with one foot placed in “North America” and the other in “Africa.”

While Tane’s poem does not specifically address the issue of race, her poem clearly resists the ideological and discursive terms through which identity is constructed in capitalist society, and which produce essentialist ideas of racial identity as reproduced in the review of *The Big Sea*. Tane and Spicehandler were both members of the same ILGWU local, and this fact suggests that the ILGWU did provide an educational platform wherein a range of diverse ideas could be fostered. Read in the context of its publication in *Justice*, the poem’s use of the pronoun and possessive pronoun “you” and “your” refer not only to an unidentified second person, but also to the readers themselves, implicating them in construction of this alternative model of the poetics and politics of being. The direct address to the reader here raises the appeal beyond a more insular poetics that defines the self only in relation to one other, as is found, for example, in love poetry.

The limitations of such a poetics are exposed by Tane in her poignant love poem, “We Two,” published in the September 15, 1940 edition of *Justice*. The poem begins by describing the process of falling in love as one which literally incorporates each lover unto the other. Tane writes, “I came to you bringing/ my loneliness to yours,/ shaping a love that was/ like music under my skin,/ that was to my ears one sound,/ to my eyes one face,/ to my mouth one mouth/ ever encore on mine.” Love, as Tane here expresses, implies an intersubjective relationship in which the self is re-defined wholly in relation to the other, in both metaphysical and bodily terms. Again, Levinas’ work is helpful in understanding the broader philosophical and social implications of Tane’s poetry. In “The Ego and Totality,” Levinas argues, “The intersubjective relationship of love is not the beginning, but the negation of society.... Love is the ego satisfied by the you, apprehending in the other the justification of its being” (“Ethics” 31). The problem, therefore, with the poetics of being formulated in the love lyric arises when love breaks down, when the subjective identity of each individual must attempt to extricate itself from the inter-subjective experiential framework within which it remains trapped. In “We Two,” Tane presents the position of the former lover in terms of incarceration, “I am alone in the circle/ of my room tight around me/ like an iron hoop.” Tane’s poem expresses the tragedy of the struggle of the self to extricate itself from this incarceration in the wake of love’s failure. The poem concludes, “The night outside is/ entangled with/ branches of the trees,/ as is my love



enmeshed in loneliness/ come back to me/ with the impact of memories.” If love implies an inter-subjective relationship established in isolation from broader social relations, then the failure of love leaves the subject struggling to re-define his identity in relation to a society from which, as a lover, he had wilfully excluded himself.

Returning to “Identity,” we can now see that the direct appeal to the reader at the poem’s concluding line, “I wait for our identity,” provides a means of breaking out of the insularity of the love lyric, and implicates the reader in the articulation of an alternative lyricism that is developed through a conscious social engagement. However, while “Identity” has laid the foundations for an alternative lyric model, the final sentence acknowledges that this model has not yet been developed; the “I” must “wait.” The use of the collective possessive pronoun in the poem’s concluding line reinforces the idea that this new lyric model will be born of a collective experience of alienation, and that it will, in time, give rise to a poetics that knowingly bears the marks of its development within a social antagonism.

Having discussed Tane’s depiction of the debilitating social implications of capitalist ideology, and her expression of alienation from the forms of subjective identity that this ideology makes available, I will now move to a discussion of a poem that charts a movement towards an alternative lyric position. While Taggard was concerned to attack individualism in favour of a collective class consciousness, Tane’s poetry follows an alternative course of attempting to stake out a lyric position alternative to that provided by dominant social and literary discourses. Although it appears in the October 1, 1939 edition of *Justice*, just over a year before the publication of “Identity,” the poem offers an early attempt by Tane to forge a lyric position outside that determined by the material and ideological conditions of capitalism. The poem reads as follows:

I must evacuate my mind  
of the sand-bagged city  
waiting with arched back  
for the bomb boom,  
in black.

I must mute the magpie city  
screaming bullet headlines  
on wires strung through clouds

down open mouths  
of crowds.

I must gouge out the neon eye  
of the city from the  
mind's marquee, for  
in the city there  
is war – in the city where  
peace is a breadcrumb on  
the viscous [sic] ancient waters.

I must stop my ears with country  
side, graft it to my ear  
like soft womanbreast  
to muffle all  
the rest.

I must find music intimate as  
a hand, and know again the  
moist manner of rain,  
birdfeet on the  
terrain.

I must sit in shadowed space, wear-  
ing soft mittens of non-  
remembrance, cool as glass  
through which, non-heating,  
suns pass – in the country where  
the color of silence is green,  
and not the colour of death! ("Evacuation")

Having printed "Evacuation" here in full, we can see that there is a clear relationship between the poem's title and the poetic form, one which reflects the poem's thematic development. The title, "Evacuation" suggests an act of withdrawal and displacement, and this is mirrored in the form of stanzas one, two, four, and five, which progress by way of a displacement of poetic metre in favour of blank space. Although the United States was not yet a participant, the title also immediately situates the poem in relation to the context of the Second World War. The imagery of war provides a menacing backdrop against which the poem's "evacuation" is staged. Discussing this poem,

Marsh argues that while Tane's poetry shows that mass culture and consumption fail to offer an escape from war and work, "much of Tane's poetry does share with the British Romantic poets and American transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau the belief that "the good" can be found in nature" (*"Justice Poetry"* 53). In this respect, as Marsh continues, the poem clearly engages with "the long tradition of what Leo Marx in his classic study calls 'the pastoral ideal', which he characterizes as the "urge to withdraw from civilization's growing power and complexity"" (*"Justice Poetry"* 54). While I share Marsh's overall analysis that "Evacuation" is an example of Tane's adherence to "the pastoral ideal," I will expand on this insight by situating a discussion of this pastoralism in relation to Tane's engagement with the lyric.

The first line of the poem presents a direct analogy between the mental and physical space, expressing an idea of the mind as a location which can be emptied out. Whereas in "Identity" the figuration of the mind in terms of space and movement in the line "mindless as a revolving door" expressed the subject's passive state of alienation, here the speaking subject is engaged actively in the (re)construction of its own identity. This sense of "evacuation" as an active process is reinforced throughout the poem in the repetition at the beginning of each stanza of the imperative phrase, "I must." The typographic and grammatical opposition between "I" and "mind" on the poem's first line, however, tacitly establishes an opposition between the ideas of the "I" and of the "mind." This opposition implies a sense of alienation. In this respect, as well as signifying an imperative command, the opposition between the concepts of "I" and "mind" also makes it possible to read the sentence as expressing the idea that the speaker's subjective identity, the "I," must be evacuated from the "mind" that it occupies. Read on its own, the meaning of the initial line introduces an ambiguity that subtly draws the reader's attention to the poem's exploration of "evacuation" in terms of a negotiation of identity. If, as discussed earlier, alienation is the prerequisite of social critique, then the poem subtly establishes this prerequisite within the first line.

However, moving to the second line, the preposition "of" locates the "mind" as the object of evacuation and sets up a subsequent opposition between the mind and the "sand-bagged city." The description of the city as "sand-bagged," however, suggests a correlation between the establishment of a physical location and the description of mental evacuation here described. The idea that the city is "sand-bagged" suggests that the establishment of this urban space is achieved through its fortification against the prior, external landscape which it has displaced. The correlation between the mind and

the city thus seems ironic; the mind must perform the same action of withdrawal and defence as enacted by the agent against which it will come to be defined. In this sense, the parallel between the mind and the sand-bagged city again reflects Levinas' description of the establishment of individual subjectivity in terms of a possessive movement, "the laying down of the ego of its own sovereignty" ("Ethics" 85). As the first stanza progresses, the relationship between mental and physical space is expanded to account for the human body. The concision with which these conceptual relationships are established is testament to the efficacy of Tane's formal experimentation. As Marsh notes, the poem makes clear Tane's willingness to distort conventional form and rhyme, her "lineation buries rhymes within lines" (*Justice Poetry* 53). The effect of this use of buried rhyme is frequently to imply subtle connections. The rhyme between "back" and "black" implies a potentially threatening connection between the human body and the imagined "bomb boom." As Marsh notes, the adjective "arched" reinforces the idea of the vulnerability of the human body, as the arched backs "awaiting the bomb boom perhaps recall the destroyed arches of cathedrals of the last great European war" (*Justice Poetry* 53). The phrase "arched back" also reflects the form of this stanza, again demonstrating the capacity of Tane's poetry to subtly and concisely draw attention to the connections between poetic form and socio-political relations. The first stanza, then, demonstrates the nature of the relationship between mental, material and physical reality from within which the "I" must stage a withdrawal.

The second stanza juxtaposes the natural with the mechanical. The use of "magpie" as an adjective to describe the city reinforces the sense that urban space is established through the usurpation of a prior claim. Further, Tane's imagery shows the relationship between the mechanical and the natural to be characterized by a debilitating violence, headlines are "bullets" which are force-fed to the masses through wires, in a perverse reflection of the process by which mother birds feed their young by regurgitating food into their open mouths. Marcuse's writing on technology is helpful when considering the political implications of the relationship between the human and the mechanical here described. Marcuse identifies the nature of technological development as inherently political in character, because it constitutes the technical basis on which social organization rests. As Marcuse argues, "Technological rationality reveals its political character as it becomes the vehicle of better domination, creating a truly totalitarian universe in which society and nature, mind and body are kept in a state

of permanent mobilization for the defense of this universe” (20). The increased mechanization of labour under advanced capitalism causes the identification of the worker with the mechanical and political systems of which he is a part. Quoting a worker who says of his experience in the mechanized labour force, “All in all, we are in the swing of things,” Marcuse argues that the phrase illustrates a qualitative change in the nature of “mechanized enslavement,” “things swing rather than oppress, and they swing the human instrument – not only its body but also its mind and even its soul” (29). Therefore, the integration of the worker into a mechanized industrial process is also the integration of his being with the technics of the dominant political ideology.

Tane’s comparison of throats to telephone wires illustrates the way in which this assimilation of the human with the mechanical extends beyond the workplace. Marcuse is helpful when considering Tane’s work, because he makes clear the way in which advanced capitalism makes it highly difficult for the individual to develop a critical perspective on the political reality of which he/she is a part. He writes, “it is precisely this new consciousness, this ‘space within’, the space for transcending historical practice, which is being barred by a society in which subjects as well as objects constitute instrumentalities in a whole that has its *raison d’être* in the accomplishments of its overpowering productivity” (Marcuse 26). In this context, “Evacuation” can be read as Tane’s attempt to establish such a “space within,” and stake out a lyric vantage point that has a critical perspective on the society from which it has emerged.

While the first two stanzas have described this process of evacuation in terms of a withdrawal or shutting out of reality - reflected in the formal displacement of metre in favour of blank space - the third stanza re-figures this process in terms of the subject’s active engagement with this reality. Violently, the subject must “gouge out” the “neon eye/ of the city from the/ mind’s marquee,” an active process of self-mutilation. The violence of this image provides a sense that the evacuation of reality from the mind is also a struggle of the mind against this reality. As Marcuse argues, “To the degree to which consciousness is determined by the exigencies and interests of the established society, it is ‘unfree’” and therefore, “consciousness becomes free ... only in the struggle *against* the established society” (227). To struggle against consciousness as it is determined by the established order, the individual must wreak violence on the perspective with which he has been endowed. Moreover, the violent rhetoric here reinforces Tane’s conflation of mind and space, with the image of the city as an “eye”

which the “I” must forcibly remove. However, the spatial movement effected by this rhetorical conflation is dizzying; the mind is a “marquee” which somehow contains a city. The giddy nature of this rhetorical construction is heightened in the elliptical expansion provided in the stanza’s final three lines, as the now extended urban perspective rapidly shifts from the minute “breadcrumb” to the broader, “vicious ancient waters.” In gouging out this “eye,” then, the “I” forcibly rids itself of a mentally and physically unsettling experiential framework.

Having performed this excision, the poem moves to the countryside. As Marsh notes, “As it moves from city to country, however, the second half of the poem does not so much juxtapose as invert the tropes and figures of the first half” (“*Justice Poetry*” 53). This inversion constitutes the poem’s pastoralism, as the oppressive imagery associated with the urban environment becomes reconceived through a pastoral lens. For example, instead of “magpie city” we have the softer “birdfeet on the terrain.” This movement of inversion from the urban to the pastoral has implications for the process of bodily reconstruction begun in the poem’s first half. Now, instead of an excision we have a grafting, the body is reconstituted through the acquisition and integration of external material. The analogy between “country” and “womanbreast” shows Tane’s adherence to a dominant pastoral tradition in which the land is gendered as female. The grotesque nature of the image in the line, “I must stop my ears with country/ side, graft it to my ear/ like soft womanbreast/ to muffle all the rest” indeed demonstrates that the lyric subject that emerges from within established society will bear the marks of its struggle against this society. The subject emerges with one eye gouged out, and with breasts grafted to its ears. Bearing this image in mind, Levinas’ argument that the establishment of individual identity involves an acquisitive movement seems true even when this identity is established through a process of negative opposition. In this respect, Levinas’ work is helpful in thinking through some of the ontological and ethical implications of the lyric movement that the poem enacts.

The poem’s final stanza makes clear that the “new consciousness” that emerges from within the existing social order will define itself in negative opposition to that order. While this stanza also reinforces Tane’s faith in a pastoral ideal, the imagery which Tane here employs suggests that the importance of this ideal rests as much in what it negates, as in what it affirms. In this light, as Marsh argues, the pastoralism of this poem is not simply an “unimaginative or uncomplicated escapism, as Leo Marx would sometimes characterize it, but perhaps more of an example of what Herbert

Marcuse would call “negative freedom”: an unwillingness to accept the misery, waste, destruction, and needless toil of advanced industrial society” (“*Justice Poetry*” 54). For Marcuse, this “negative freedom” is “the *a priori* of the historical dialectic; it is the element of choice and decision in and against historical determination” (227-228). This process of negation is therefore a precondition of any “Transcendence beyond the established conditions (of thought and action),” and “presupposes transcendence *within* these conditions” (227). Marcuse’s concept of “negative freedom,” therefore, provides an explanatory model of a key idea within Marxist theory, “the notion that the liberating historical forces develop *within* the established society” (26).

Tane’s final stanza demonstrates that the “evacuation” of the mind involves the refusal and negation of the established conditions through which its thoughts have been defined. The idea of negation is established clearly within the stanza’s first line, with the phrase “sit in shadowed space.” The use of sibilants here tacitly supports the idea that the poem is moving to a soft and sheltered space. The image of the shadow is used elsewhere by Tane to establish a sense of identity arrived at through a process of negation. For example, the November 1, 1940 poem, “Snow,” begins with the line “More real than I/ my shadow before me/ like a Halloween hanging.” The use of “shadow” as an image of negative self-definition also had currency within the poetry of the international Left, an eloquent example of which is to be found in contemporary Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca’s line, “I am the enormous shadow of my tears” in the “Ghazal of Dark Death” in his elegiac collection *The Tamarit Divan* (Lorca 783). For Tane, the negotiation of an alternative lyric space involves a negation of the existing order that is manifested in pastoralism, whereas in Lorca’s elegiac work the subject is defined through its desire for an unspecified absence. As Christopher Maurer argues, rather than adhering to “a rather conventional elegiac contrast of what *is* and what *was*,” Lorca cultivates a “metaphysical elegy”; that contrasts “what *is* and what *might have been*” (*Tamarit* xxxv). In contrast to Tane, in the “Ghazals” of *The Tamarit Divan* Lorca develops an anti-pastoral lyric in which the self is defined through its longing for a presence comprehended only as a renunciation of the pastoral. For example, in “Ghazal of the Terrible Presence,” Lorca writes “I want there to be no channel for the water./ I want there to be no valleys for the wind.... I can endure a sunset green with poison/ and the broken arches where time suffers,” and concludes with, “Leave me in longing for your shadowy planets,/ but do not show me the cool of your waist” (*Tamarit* 774-775). While Tane’s pastoralism contrasts with Lorca’s elegiac anti-pastoralism,

their work is similar in its articulation of an idea of the self defined in negative terms, and in their concern to demonstrate the poetics through which such a negative movement is achieved; that is, through a pastoral evacuation, or through the expression of an anti-pastoral desire. In both cases, poetic movement is shown to constitute, rather than explicate, the identity of the lyric subject.

While these examples of the imagery of negation are driven by poetic intention, the rhetoric of negation also emerges in the subtext of articles in *Justice*. An example of this is to be found in the “Our Women” column of September 15, 1940, printed alongside the poem “We Two” discussed earlier. Written by Susan White and printed in every edition of *Justice*, “Our Women” offers commentary on and pragmatic advice to women regarding a range of issues. Addressing the contemporary opinion that New York was going to overtake Paris as the “world’s fashion centre,” White writes “American silhouettes were going to burst suddenly upon a breathless world.” While White’s choice of the word “silhouette” is a result of the article’s fashion context, the line is revealing in that it subtly connotes the idea that the identity of American women is produced by the negative tracing of their profile. Further, the bursting of silhouettes, or projection of American shadows onto the global sphere, is linked to the development of the identity of American women. White concludes the article by arguing that, “American women will probably evolve, with the opportunities at their disposal, into the world’s real glamour girls.” Albeit unintentionally, White’s remarkable rhetoric presents the evolution of American womanhood in terms of a negation. Tane’s shadow imagery, therefore, is an example of a critical engagement with a rhetorical and conceptual construction that holds broader valency within the pages of *Justice*.

Moving beyond the first line of the poem’s final stanza, the rhetoric of negation is further developed. Enjambment is used to reflect the sense that this mental evacuation is a process of breaking off, a movement beyond the confines of the “magpie city.” For example, the enjambment of “non-/ remembrance” typographically supports the fragmented mental process that it describes. Using an item of clothing, “mittens” as an image of non-remembrance conveys the idea that the grotesque subject who emerges into this pastoral scene is able to fashion an apparel that shields it from the pain of its own antagonistic social development. Yet, by using the image of “mittens,” Tane again exposes the tailoring involved in her lyric engagement, rather than maintaining an illusory poetic seamlessness. Ironically, Tane’s use of clothing as a figurative image of the self’s relationship to society is echoed in the “Our Women” column next to which it



is printed. White argues, “There seems to be no question but that style, like literature and wages, is an expression of the times in which we live.” Whereas White condemns women whose fashions trivialise world events – those who wear “battleship buttons” – Tane here uses clothing in figurative terms as a technology capable of shutting out the world altogether. The mittens render the subject impermeable to outside influence, they remain “cool as glass” despite the passage of “non-heating,/ suns.” Yet, it should be noted that the suns passage is itself unaffected by this curious figure in mittens. This image suggests that while negation is a prerequisite of the transcendence of social conditions, it does not of itself constitute a revolution in the established order. The establishment of a critical “space within” as a site of revolutionary consciousness is a precondition to social change, but it does not of itself constitute this change. In the poem, the subject resists the experience of the sun’s passage, but this passage still occurs. As Marcuse argues, “none of the given alternatives [to the ‘power of given facts’] is *by itself* determinate negation unless and until it is consciously seized in order to break the power of intolerable conditions” (228). Marcuse’s use of the term “seized” is revealing, for the term suggests that the establishment of revolutionary consciousness will involve the same process of acquisition and possession that Levinas identifies as constituting the terms of subjective consciousness *per se*. To recognise that – at least for Marcuse – revolutionary class struggle assumes the form of a *seizure* is therefore crucial in understanding the metaphysical and ethical implications of the movement of “negative freedom” that the poem enacts. Marsh argues that in its refusal to accept “‘that which is’ as true,” Tane’s pastoralism “keeps alive a realm of abstraction, negation, that is one of the few chances for qualitative political change – or at least sanity in a seemingly mad world” (“Justice Poetry” 54). Returning to “Evacuation,” the repetition of the negative pronoun “non” reinforces the significance of this poem’s evacuation as a movement toward “negative freedom.” The affirmation of the pastoral idealism in the poem’s penultimate line, “the color of silence is green,” gives way to the poem’s final definition of this colour in negative terms as “not the color of death.” Ultimately, this poem demonstrates the importance of negation as a movement through which the self can establish a position outwith established conditions of thought and action. Through its pastoral movement, “Evacuation” enacts a progression through which the subject establishes a “negative freedom” in relation to the existing social order, and lays bare the poetics behind the staking out of a “space within.” The poem, therefore, performs a movement prerequisite to the establishment of a lyric subject

alternative to that maintained by dominant literary and ideological conditions. However, in recognising Marcuse's argument that the revolutionary potential of this realm of negation is realised through a process of seizure, the poem leaves us questioning whether or not the subject that establishes itself on such a space will be complicit in maintaining the ontological disposition latent to the ideological conditions which it has rejected.

Following on from this, I will discuss a poem in which this newly established subject asserts itself, and lays out the terms of its being. Published in the April 15, 1941 edition of *Justice*, "Self Mood" is a declaration of identity that offers further insight into the ontological manoeuvre of the subject which emerges from the newly evacuated poetic space. The poem reads:

I am walking down  
a street in the night.

I am full of much I understand,  
and full of much remembering:  
not understanding will be  
remembered and turned to  
inward music, and slip  
like time into my blood.

I am the soft murmuring  
in the darkness of a violin.

My senses are not five  
but five thousand;  
I absorb and am absorbed.

I see, know, touch everything.  
there is no strangeness anywhere.

I am not lonely, for the people  
I meet I have met in my child-  
hood, -  
only their faces are changed.

I am so much that I am not.

I am the dreamer dreaming  
the inescapable dream of himself. ("Self Mood")

The title of the poem immediately makes clear its thematic relationship to the poems earlier discussed, signalling Tane's further exploration of the poetics of selfhood. Indeed, the sound of "mood" suggests an association with the absent term "selfhood," with which it rhymes. The substitution of terms here replaces an understanding of the self as a transcendental concept, with an understanding of the self as constituted by the modality of its existence. The initial couplet, "I am walking down/ a street in the night" recalls Tane's earlier discourse on the "night" in the poem "Identity." As I argued, in "Identity" the poem's evocations of the night mark a shift from a preliminary resistance to the ideological terms through which the speaker's subjective identity is established, to an expression of alienation from this identity, "I walk through the night/ without identity." At the beginning of "Self Mood," however, this sense of alienation is notably absent. The poem's initial ipseity is articulated using the present continuous tense, reflecting the title's expression of the idea of the self as constituted through the mode of its operation and expression. Whereas in "Identity," "night" was presented as a curiously unstructured, ineffable concept, here the presence of the "street" suggests that the "I" has acquired a means of navigating its way through the experience of reality. The preposition "down" further introduces a new sense of the "night" as an object to which one can now occupy a relational position, going against the earlier use of "night" as an irreducible, figurative concept. The poem's title and initial couplet, therefore, establish the idea that this poem is giving expression to an alternative, un-alienated subject that is newly confident of its own position.

The second stanza elaborates on the ontological operation through which this subject is maintained. The repetition of the assertive "I am" here reinforces the self-confident nature of the speaking subject. The first two lines of this stanza suggest an immediate relationship between self-assurance and comprehension. The description of the "I" as being "full" of understanding and remembrance, suggests the correlative nature of the relationship between ipseity and comprehension. The self-possession of the subject is here presented as a form of satiety, in which its desire for knowledge is fully satisfied. In "Ethics as First Philosophy," Levinas argues that a correlation

between being and knowledge underpins Western philosophy, and the model of self-consciousness which it has historically supported. He writes, “The correlation between knowledge and being, or the thematics of contemplation, indicates both a difference and a difference that is *overcome* in the true. Here the known is understood and so *appropriated* by knowledge, and as it were freed of its otherness” (76). In this correlative process, “being, as the *other* of thought becomes the characteristic *property* of thought as knowledge” (76). Being, then, is constituted through the possessive movement of thought as knowledge. The self is maintained through its identification and possession of that which is foreign to itself. For Levinas, this possessive movement takes the form of knowledge. Knowledge is, in these terms “an activity which *appropriates and grasps* the otherness of the known.... Knowledge as perception, concept, comprehension, refers back to an act of grasping” (76). Another link between Marcuse’s description of the process through which revolutionary consciousness establishes itself in the world, and the establishment of subjective consciousness *per se* is suggested in Levinas’ rhetorical echo of Marcuse in his argument that, “The immanence of the known to the act of knowing is already the embodiment of *seizure*” [my emphasis] (“Ethics” 76). Subjectivity, understood as the reduction of the other to the same, is achieved through the possessive operation of knowledge. Levinas clearly outlines his understanding of the nature of the relationship between knowledge and self-identity in *Totality and Infinity*. Again drawing on Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein*, Levinas argues that the possibility of “possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is at first other, and other relative to me, is the way of the same. I am at home with myself in the world because it offers itself to or resists possession” (38). For Levinas, the possessive movement through which the “I” establishes a home for itself within the world constitutes the operation of subjective consciousness, “The identification of the same is not the void of a tautology nor a dialectical opposition to the other, but the concreteness of egoism” (38).

Returning to the poem, the progression of the second stanza elaborates on the process by which the correlative relationship between being and comprehension established in the first two lines is enacted. While the use of the word “full” in the stanza’s first two lines suggests that ipseity is maintained by the satisfaction of the subject’s desire for understanding and remembrance, the subsequent progression of the stanza demonstrates the acquisitive movement through which this satisfaction is sustained. The phrase, “not-understanding will be/ remembered” suggests that that

which is exterior to the subject's knowledge is appropriated through remembrance. Indeed, through remembrance "not-understanding" will be "turned to/ inward music, and slip/ like time into my blood." This extraordinary imagery reflects Levinas' idea that the self is established through its appropriation of that which is other to it. The abstract movement that Tane presents here is staggering. The hyphenated abstract noun, "not-understanding" first defines reality in terms of a negative relationship with the subject. Through remembrance, this alterity is negated by a process of internalisation, as suggested in the phrase "inward music." Figured as "music," external reality is also disincarnated, and becomes dissociated from any notion of substance. This "music" can then be converted into a sensation, in which state it becomes intelligible to the self. Reality takes on significance only in the extent to which it assumes meaning for the self, and thereby allows the self to assume its meaning. As Levinas argues, consciousness becomes self-consciousness "at the same time that it becomes conscious of the exteriority that lies beyond its nature" (*Collected Philosophical Papers* 27). Having been made intelligible to the self by its conversion into "music," "not-understanding" is then literally incorporated into the speaker's being, by slipping into its blood. Tane's comparison of this abstract music to "time" suggests that the process of trans-substantiation here presented is one in which the structuring principles of reality are also incorporated into the being of the subject in the process of its self-definition. Time, then, is shown to assume significance in relation to the subject, rather than being presented solely as an abstract concept that delimits the nature of subjective experience.

The third stanzaic couplet of "Self Mood" relates back to the idea of negative self-definition discussed earlier in relation to the poem "Evacuation." While in "Evacuation," the speaker declared an imperative need to position himself outside of the destructive urban landscape, "I must sit in shadowed space," the image of this couplet suggests that the speaker's voice now calmly emanates from a discursive site established through the negation of dominant modes of expression, "in the darkness of a violin." In this respect, this couplet refers back to the negative movement through which Tane's poetics established the grounds of an alternative lyric position. However, this exposure of the poem's own lyric heritage is brief, and gives way in the remainder of the poem to the articulation and enactment of the "Self Mood" presented in the title.

Beginning with the possessive pronoun, "My," the fourth stanza reinforces the idea that the subject who establishes himself on the site of "negative freedom" will replicate the imperial ontological movement characteristic of the subjective experience

latent to the ideology which it rejects. The sensibility of the subject is shown here to be infinitely expansive, capable of drawing into its ken a multiplicity of experience, “My senses are not five/ but five thousand.” This image further suggests the way in which subjective consciousness is maintained through the subject’s capacity to identify and incorporate that which is exterior to it. Tane’s figuration of this process in terms of remembrance reflects Levinas’ idea that self-identity is constituted through a process of continuous self-discovery. In extending its identity to that which is alien to itself, the self continuously rediscovers its own position, defined in relation to the exterior reality which it has grasped. Levinas argues, “The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that can happen to it” (*Totality and Infinity* 36). In expanding the range of its senses, the subject comes to define itself more lucidly through the grasping of a broader knowledge.

Alterity, then, is the condition that allows for the continuous recovery of the “I” from the world which it comes to know. According to Levinas, “in knowing or representing itself it [the I] possesses itself, dominates itself, extends its identity to what of itself comes to refute this identity” (*Totality and Infinity* 87). This double movement in which the subject continuously (re)defines itself in relation to that which it is not is expressed by Tane in the final line of the fourth stanza, “I absorb and am absorbed.” The double movement in the ontology of subjective consciousness therefore reflects the double movement in the relationship between the subject and ideology identified by Althusser. While in “Identity,” Tane demonstrated the way in which subjects are simultaneously constitutive of and constituted by ideology, the poet here provides a discursive enactment of the double movement through which subjective consciousness operates. Following on from this, Tane shows that the freedom of the subject rests in its capacity for knowledge, which for Levinas, “amounts to grasping being out of nothing or reducing it to nothing, removing it from its alterity” (*Totality and Infinity* 44). The possessive movement of this grasp need not originate in violence. Levinas argues that the relation between the “I” and the world, “in which the ‘I’ is revealed precisely as pre-eminently the same, is produced as a *sojourn* in the world” and so, “It is enough to walk, to *do*, in order to grasp anything, to take” (37). In this light, it seems fitting that Tane’s articulation of “Self Mood” begins with a walk. The freedom arrived at through the possessive movement of knowledge finds expression in Tane’s couplet, “I see, know, touch everything,/ there is no strangeness anywhere.” For Tane, remembrance

makes the freedom achieved by knowledge extensive over a period of time, and allows the subject to account for itself despite the changes which time's passage brings about. This idea is expressed in the poem's sixth stanza, where Tane writes, "I am not lonely, for the people/ I meet I have met in my child-/ hood, -/ only their faces are changed."

The poem's clearest articulation of the ontological imperialism through which subjective consciousness is established comes in the single line of the eighth stanza which reads, "I am so much that I am not." Presented as a stand-alone line, the form of this short stanza reflects the ontological movement that it describes, by drawing attention to its displacement of blank space in favour of text. In this respect, Tane once again draws attention to the role of poetics in underwriting the possessive movement of subjective identity. Whereas at the beginning of the poem "Evacuation," the formal and grammatical opposition between "I" and "mind" tacitly expressed a sense of alienation from self-identity, the oppositional balance between "I am" and "I am not" here expresses a hierarchical relationship, in which the self continuously brings itself about through the appropriation of exterior reality. The sentiment of this line is echoed in the concluding lines of the later poem "Summer Concert," published August 15, 1942, in which Tane writes, "I do not wish to die/ but wish to be all things." Reflecting Levinas' description of the ontology of being, the sentence "I am so much that I am not" gives expression to the possessive movement in which the sovereignty of the ego is established through its appropriation of that which is exterior to it. The ambiguity of this sentence lies in its refusal to support a lyric mode in which the "I" is located in a position that wilfully obscures its own ontological foundations. Instead, the seemingly paradoxical statement of this sentence reflects the way in which the "I" is shown to be simultaneously constituted by, and constitutive of the condition of alterity through which the ego is maintained. Indeed, ipseity is here shown to be inseparable from the simultaneous expression of what the "I" is not. Similarly, Levinas argues that the ego does not exist prior to the ontological conditions through which it is maintained. In "Metaphysics and Transcendence" he writes, "The I is not a contingent function by which the same and the other, as logical determinations of being, can in addition be reflected *within a thought*" (*Totality and Infinity* 39). And so, he continues, "It is in order that alterity be produced *in being* that a "thought" is needed and an "I" is needed" (39). In this respect, the significance of Tane's statement lies in its expression of the imperial movement through which the "I" locates itself in relation to the world, and in its demonstration of the inseparability of the "I" from performance of this movement.

In its concern to demonstrate the nature of selfhood as a performance, Tane's poem again speaks subtly to Susan White's "Our Women" column alongside which it is printed. Reflecting its April publication date, White's article adopts a direct and imperative tone in demanding of the readers that they shift the focus of their spring cleaning from their houses to themselves. White argues, "Now is the time, you know, when you ought also to be giving yourself a thorough "going over" as it were, "getting into all the corners," and dumping everything that isn't needed but that's taking up a lot of room" ("Our Women"). The reader must be given a "going over," re-modelled in terms of White's conventional ideal of feminine health and beauty. The article takes the form of a series of commands, designed to address every aspect of the individual woman, "Resolve to get a complete physical check-up.... Plan for outings in the sun, ... change the part in your hair for a while. Spend at least ten minutes every day loosening your scalp, ... And please, PLEASE stop being a coward, an ostrich, about your skin." Conceding the reality that "All this, of course, won't change the basic fact that you still have to work for a living," White argues that, at least, "it will make the whole business seem a lot more worthwhile when you wake up in the morning." White implores the reader to re-model him or herself in accordance with her lengthy list of commands. Printed next to each other in *Justice*, the abstract concerns of Tane's poem are brought into dialogue with White's article. Read alongside each other, the reader is able to relate Tane's exploration of identity with White's prescriptive vision of womanhood. In this respect, the essentialist understanding of gender expressed in White's article is shown to rely on the prior constitution of the subjective identity unto which these changes are to be wrought. Tane's exploration of the poetics of "Self Mood" is immediately juxtaposed with White's question, "Yes, but what about yourself?." It becomes apparent that, to be re-made, the self must first exist. In this respect, the juxtaposition of the poem with the article makes clear the problematic inter-relationship between the politics and the poetics of identity on which it rests.

Returning to address the lyric implications of Tane's statement, "I am so much that I am not," it seems significant that this articulation of "Self Mood" re-enacts the possessive ontological movement through which subjective identity is maintained. Having defined a position for itself in terms of a "negative freedom," Tane's alternative lyric subject replicates the imperial movement latent to the constitution of subjective consciousness. However, by providing a discursive re-enactment of this movement, Tane lays bare the ontological operation through which the lyricism of "Self Mood" is



established, going against the grain of a lyric mode in which the “I” seems to emerge effortlessly onto a transcendent plane. Thus, her work makes clear the possible implications which a rejection and negation of the existing social conditions could have for individual consciousness. Importantly, the rejection of the existing conditions of thought and being articulated in “Evacuation” does not lead to the development of a lyric identity which would somehow transcend these conditions.

Levinas’ remarks in the section “Transcendence Is Not Negativity” in *Totality and Infinity* offer insight into the reasons why this negation does not necessarily lead to any metaphysical transcendence. Levinas’ thought on negation was formulated as a critique of Hegel and the Hegelian dialectic. As Howard Caygill comments, “Studying Hegel in a German POW camp clarified Levinas’ opposition to an entire style of philosophy and what might be regarded as its political consequences” (53). In *Existence and Existents* (1947), Levinas developed a critique of Hegel which, Caygill argues, deflates “the premises of speculative dialectic: negation, movement through contradiction, the speculative result” (53). Levinas’ critique of the Hegelian dialectic rests in his recognition that “the negation of the negation does not produce a result”; that is, negation does not result in a transcendence of the existing order (Caygill 54). Formulated as a critique of the Hegelian dialectic which underpins Marxist thought, it is not surprising that Levinas’ commentary on the concept of negation presents a challenge to the later development of this idea expressed by Marcuse in *One-Dimensional Man*. What is interesting, however, is to note how far this critique applies to a poetics of being rooted in a foundational rejection of the existing conditions of reality which, as I have shown, is evident in Tane’s work. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas applies his critique of the concept of negation to his understanding of ontology. He argues, “Negativity presupposes a being established, placed in a site where he is at home [chez soi]” (*Totality and Infinity* 40). As we saw in the conclusion of the poem “Evacuation,” the rejection of the established order is predicated on the subject’s emergence into a critical “space within” this ideology, as in Tane’s image of the speaker sitting in shadowed space. The subject thereby establishes a new site of being, a site which remains determined by that which it negates; Tane’s pastoralism is manifested through the inversion of the poem’s earlier urban imagery. In this respect, as Levinas argues, the subject’s “resistance is still within the same. The negator and the negated are posited together, form a system, that is, a totality” (41). This type of negative self-definition therefore maintains the condition of alterity through which, as we have seen, subjective

consciousness is established. In Levinas' terms, "This mode of negating while taking refuge in what one negates delineates the same or the 'I,'" and so, "The idea of the perfect and of infinity is not reducible to the negation of the imperfect; negativity is incapable of transcendence" (41).

Levinas' commentary on negation helps to explain why Tane's poetic movement toward "negative freedom," replicates rather than transcends the ontology latent to the ideology which she rejects. In this respect, the "metaphysical elegy" cultivated by Lorca comes to seem more radical in its lyric import. Contrasting presence with a metaphysical idea of what *might have been*, Lorca's work opens up possibilities of being which exceed those made available by a simple negation of terms. For example, the line from the poem "8:00pm" in *Suites*, "& I thinking back to a sweetheart/ I never did have" renders the subject radically indeterminate (231). However, a significant aspect of Tane's work is the lucidity with which it exposes the ontological movement attendant upon the subject's refusal of the real conditions of its existence, showing one permutation of what can happen when the self says "no" to the world.

Having laid bare the imperialist ontology which lies behind the speaker's "Self Mood," the poem concludes with the couplet, "I am the dreamer dreaming/ the inescapable dream of himself." Rather than maintaining what Adorno referred to as "the illusion of nature emerging from alienation," Tane articulates an understanding of identity as "an illusion which the subject continuously creates as a response to the real conditions of its existence" (Adorno 348). The image therefore exposes the nature of the lyric subject as emerging from, rather than transcending, the prevailing ideological and material conditions. The hard assonance of the repetitious "dreamer dreaming ... dream," and the description of the dream as "inescapable" suggests the oppressive, frustrating nature of the self's imprisonment within the illusion of its own identity. The figuration of identity as an imaginative act – an "inescapable dream" – also suggests that identity is sustained through a process of self-representation. Similarly, Levinas argues that, "The subject is part of its own representation" (*Collected Philosophical Papers* 4). Elaborating on this idea, he writes, "The subject is "for itself" – it represents itself and knows itself as long as it is. But in knowing or representing itself it possesses itself, dominates itself, extends its identity to what of itself comes to refute this identity" (*Totality and Infinity* 87). Like Tane's image of the "inescapable dream," here Levinas argues that identity is a form of sustained self-knowledge, in which the "I" perpetually grasps at the nature of its being. In the essay "Reality and Its Shadow," Levinas

expresses his scepticism regarding the potential of art to alter the imperial ontology of being which he regards as ethically unjustified, referring to art as a “dimension of evasion” (*Collected Philosophical Papers* 12). However, if identity is constituted as a form of self-knowledge, then literary representations of the self have the power to show us a clearer vision of who we are. Tane’s lyric poetry may not break out of the double-bind of subjective consciousness, but it at least provides us with the ability to reflect on the poetic and ontological operations through which this consciousness is sustained. In this respect, her lyric contribution fits with Muriel Rukeyser’s understanding that art (along with science) has the capacity to “show us what we might be, and in that *might be*, what indeed we are” (*Willard Gibbs* 438).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the foregoing analysis of Tane’s lyric engagement allows for a fuller understanding of the relationship between poetics, identity and politics. Printed in the newspaper of a socialist trade union, Tane’s work is particularly revealing in its charting of a lyric movement grounded in her critique of the oppressive nature of life under industrial capitalism. A central tenet of classical Marxism is the idea that the political change brought about by the historical awakening of the proletariat would fundamentally alter the nature of subjective experience. Indeed, as James Miller writes, in *The German Ideology* Marx “affirmed that the individual and his relations would be transformed under communism, that the individuals’ consciousness of their mutual relations will, of course, likewise become something quite different” (*History and Human Existence* 30). Under communism, subjective experience would be re-made in terms of a collective consciousness. Miller notes that Marx “described communism as the fulfilment of individual capabilities, and the cultivation of a rich, ‘subjective *human* sensibility’” (26).

This idea is carried forward into post-war Marxism, and is clearly expressed by Marcuse in the conclusion to *One-Dimensional Man*, where he argues “society would be rational and free to the extent to which it is organized, sustained, and reproduced by an essentially new historical Subject” (256). *One-Dimensional Man* is a strong indictment of the way in which the development of this new historical Subject is almost entirely precluded by the ideological and social conditions of late capitalism. In this respect, his work makes clear the importance of the renunciation of these conditions – what he refers to as the “Great Refusal” – as the preliminary step toward revolution.

Despite the importance of this idea, Marcuse does little in *One-Dimensional Man* to suggest what form the new historical Subject who comes to exist as a result of the Great Refusal might take (261). In the conclusion to *One-Dimensional Man*, he argues that the group of people most likely to perform this important preliminary refusal are “the outcasts and the outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and colors, the unemployed and the unemployable” because they exist outside “the system” (360-361). However, Marcuse suggests that the “elementary force” of this group lies in a kind of uncultivated, primitive oppositional instinct when he argues that “their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not” (360). Therefore, Marcuse leaves us wondering as to the nature of the consciousness that will emerge in the wake of this oppositional movement. However, as discussed earlier, he does make clear that the development of this consciousness will be predicated on the “seizure” of an alternative social and political reality. By bringing Marcuse into dialogue with Levinas, I have outlined some of the ontological problems which this act of “seizure” may present for the emergent revolutionary consciousness.

Through her lyric engagement, Tane’s work throws these ontological and political issues into relief. An important aspect of Tane’s work, therefore, is the way in which it traces the lyric implications of the move toward “negative freedom” grounded in a foundational act of refusal. As I have shown, poems such as “Stitching Machine” and “Identity” support Marcuse’s idea that the individual’s experience of alienation from society is a prerequisite of the social critique that finds expression in the “Great Refusal.” Following from this, “Evacuation” shows what form the poetics of such a refusal might take. Ultimately, “Self Mood” demonstrates the poetic movement through which the subject remakes its-self in the ontological aftermath of the act of negation. In working through this movement, Tane’s work demonstrates the potential outcome which this negation may hold for the individual subject. Instead of producing any transcendent consciousness, Tane’s work demonstrates that one potential outcome, at least, of this negative movement is the replication of the ontological operations through which subjective consciousness is sustained. In this respect, Tane’s poetry highlights the problematics of any Marxism which locates the potential basis of revolution in a foundational gesture of negation. Having worked through this negative movement, her work does not produce a poetics capable of supporting the fundamental alteration in the nature of subjective experience to which Marxism ultimately aims. In making this argument, I am not offering an indictment of Tane’s work. Rather, I have shown that

the significance of Tane's lyric poetry lies in the clarity with which it lays bare the nature of the relationship between poetics, politics and ontology and dispels any illusive vision of the "I" uninflected by the ideological, material and discursive conditions of its production.

## Conclusion

In investigating the relationship between poetry and politics in Depression-Era United States, my thesis has shown that precisely such an investigation was central to the literary and critical practices which I have discussed. The work explored in my thesis is also of value because of the way in which it causes readers today to critique the evaluative criteria they bring to texts, and to recognise the way in which both poetry as a genre and the critical discourse surrounding poetry has been and is delimited by historical, political, and cultural conditions. While I have deliberately drawn on a diverse body of material in this thesis, the work of Muriel Rukeyser, Genevieve Taggard, Miriam Tane and a range of ILGWU poets shares a concern to explore, reflect on and articulate an understanding of the relationship between aesthetic and political praxis. As I have argued, this concern is politically important, because the ability of these poets to reflect on and reveal the position of their work in relation to the social and material conditions under which it was produced works to de-naturalize and expose the relationship between political power and cultural practices more generally. As Bourdieu argues in *The Field of Cultural Production*, “to remember the social conditions which render possible aesthetic experience and the existence of those beings – art lovers or “people” of taste” – for whom it is possible ... is to bring to light the hidden force of the effects of the majority of culture’s social uses” (235). The dominant social uses of culture, as Bourdieu argues, serve to legitimise political privilege by obscuring the rootedness of this privilege in contingent historical and cultural processes. In contrast, by articulating and critiquing the social and material conditions of its own production, the work considered in this thesis reflects on and discloses its own position vis-à-vis the political, ideological and material circumstances within which it is situated. At a time when the continued existence of poetry was seen to be under threat due to a range of factors including the increased cultural authority of science and the perceived standardization of thought in the face of technological and industrial development, Rukeyser, Taggard, Tane and ILGWU poets conceived of and articulated new, politically transformative understandings of poetry rooted in an engagement with the pragmatic, material concerns of modern daily life. Moreover, the way in which the poetry considered in this thesis forces us to reflect on the nature of aesthetics as

conditioned by certain socio-historical conditions challenges present-day readers who privilege an aesthetic evaluation of poetry, while failing to take account of the historical and political factors through which this critical privilege has been established.

The Cold War has had a lasting impact on the reception of 1930s political poetry in the USA. As I discussed in the Introduction, the suppression of political poetry became central to the cultural conflicts that emerged from and helped underwrite the Cold War. As Lauter argues, the context of rising tension with the Soviet Union and a general suspicion of dissent, “anything categorizable as ‘deviance,’ socially engaged writing (or even thought) became suspect” (“Cold War Culture” 241). In the extent to which an apolitical perception of poetry continues to dominate public understanding, the cultural legacy of the Cold War retains its grip on literary history, and the history of poetry in particular. The recovery, appreciation and study of neglected political, working-class and labour poetry can therefore be a means of prising open this reductive grasp.

Particularly because of the unnatural silences that have befallen women’s political poetry of the 1930s, there is a need for further feminist scholarship in this area. Archival research continues to be of particular importance to feminist scholarship, as a means of breaking through the layers of silence which have accumulated over the years, muffling the voices of neglected women writers. Especially for graduate students like myself, the research impulse, “go to the archive!” can prove particularly strong. Rowena Kennedy-Epstein describes the excitement she felt on being encouraged by her PhD supervisors to undertake archival research. She writes that “They mirrored my own feeling, or I theirs, that so much of what was ‘lost’ in archives had been disappeared for a reason – because of politics, genre and disciplinary hybridity, assertions of sexual and historical subjectivity” and that, therefore, “the most valuable work one can do is to advocate for these texts and ideas, ones that ... give us new histories to think through” (Kennedy-Epstein). However, as Nelson cautions, the “admirably passionate” desire to “give voice to what our culture has repressed” must be tempered by continuous reflection on the “social and economic positioning and the necessarily historically determined nature” of our interests as readers and scholars; thereby marrying the insights of post-structuralism to a more deep-rooted Marxist impulse (“No Meaning” 11). In assessing Nelson’s legacy as a teacher, scholar and activist, John Marsh argues that “While Nelson may have pre-empted some of our best

ideas, he has also enabled even better ones” (“Without Shame”). Having drawn on Nelson’s work in this study, I recognise that my interpretation of the work considered here has been conditioned by a number of socio-historical constraints. Because of the extent to which American political and labour poetry of the early twentieth century has been neglected, the task of its scholarly recovery remains profound, challenging, and exciting. As Marsh argues, much work “still remains to be done, especially in recovering and rediscovering the literature of those who did not publish in conventional literary journals or books and who may not even considered themselves primarily poets or writers” (“Auto Writers”). In re-assessing the work of Rukeyser, Taggard, Tane and ILGWU poets, this thesis has at least established a fuller insight into the scope of what remains to be done, and enabled further, previously unasked questions to be raised.

If, as Lauter argues, the cultural conflicts of the Cold War continue to exert a strong influence over ideas of the modernist canon and appropriate approaches to its study, then there is a need for further comparative scholarship which re-assesses US literary history in relation to international political and literary history. Scholarship on American literature of the 1930s produced in the 1980s and 1990s tended to focus on an assessment of the debate which took place among American Communist intellectuals surrounding aesthetics, and of how strongly this debate mirrored developments within the Soviet Union, particularly in relation to the International Bureau of Revolutionary Literature’s conference in Kharkov in 1930. Even while scholars such as Barbara Foley, James Murphy and Judy Kutulus have produced revisionist accounts which downplay the influence which cultural developments within the Soviet Union exerted over debate within Communist intellectual literary circles in the US, Foley and Rabinowitz still largely framed their literary analysis in relation to this very debate. There is a need for comparative literary scholarship which moves beyond this paradigm, wresting scholarship on the American literary Left away from an exclusive focus on the American Communist Party. By incorporating analysis of labour and working-class poetry into the scope of literary analysis, the poetry produced by writers associated with the American Communist Party will no longer be considered in isolation from the cultural production of the Left more widely, destabilising the position of Communist writing as the “other” of American literary history. Moreover, there is a need for scholarship of the American Left which is international in scope, which investigates literary relations within the Left internationally, and how the development of the



international literary Left in the early twentieth century related to the development of modernism. Importantly, drawing attention to the American literary Left's engagement with international literature will support an effort to resist the still prevalent tendency to simply dismiss political literature, and poetry in particular, as the dogmatic expression of Party doctrine. Such an investigation will also pave the way for a fuller account of the relationship between Left literature and the development of modernism. For example, Muriel Rukeyser corresponded for over 20 years with the Scottish nationalist and Communist poet Hugh MacDiarmid. MacDiarmid sought to align his work with an American literary tradition, in order to challenge an elite metropolitan model of British modernism. Scott Lyall has argued that MacDiarmid had an interest in promoting the value of American literature, "believing that this signalled a historical renegotiation of imperial power that could also have beneficial cultural and political side-effects for Scotland" (62). Similarly, Rukeyser was influenced by MacDiarmid's "Red Scotland" thesis, in which he outlined his vision of nationalism compatible with international socialism. Exploring such relations between non-canonical, modernist Left writers like Rukeyser and MacDiarmid will allow for a deeper understanding of the relationship between modernism and the international Left than has hitherto been possible.

Just as this thesis has juxtaposed analysis of professional writers with labour poets whose work was published in non-conventional formats, comparative scholarship of the international literary Left should also draw on a range of publications, including work produced in non-conventional formats. Nelson's discussion of Spanish Civil War poetry, in *Revolutionary Memory* provides a model for such work. Indeed, for those of Rukeyser's generation, the Spanish Civil War was a seminal political event. Not only was Spain considered "the last battleground against fascism," it also reflected, as Rukeyser understood, a larger political reality in which it was seen as the place to "stop communism" (Kennedy-Epstein 2). Rukeyser witnessed the outbreak of the Spanish civil war, having been sent to Barcelona in the summer of 1936 to report on the People's Olympiad for the magazine *Life and Letters Today*. As Kennedy-Epstein notes, "the cross-genre nature of Rukeyser's work on Spain situates her amongst an important transnational network of radical women whose writings combined a range of forms including poetry, fiction, political essay and reportage" (2). These writers include Nancy Cunard, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Josephine Herbst and Spanish writers Merce Rodoreda and Maria Teresa Leon. The American Communist poet Edwin Rolfe was

among the almost 2000 Americans who volunteered for the International Brigade of the Spanish Republican Army (Levenson 6). Nelson's scholarship on American poets' engagement with the Spanish Civil War has provided an example of criticism in which poetry of the American Left has been situated within an international context, and in which analysis of conventional and non-conventional forms has been juxtaposed. Because of the seminal nature of the conflict as a political and cultural event, scholarship on American writers' engagement with the Spanish Civil War remains an important area of literary enquiry. However, in order to continue to situate study of the American literary Left within a wider frame of reference, the methodological approach which I adopt in this present study, and which Nelson adopted in relation to the study of Spanish Civil War poetry should be extended to further comparative, transnational and cross-genre literary scholarship, including an investigation of work by both professional and non-professional writers. Instead of maintaining the predominant critical focus on the relationship between Communist Intellectuals in the Soviet Union and the United States, a comparative investigation of the work of non-professional writers would give us new histories to think through, cutting against the grain of a top-down critical approach.

Such an investigation would provide us with a fuller insight into how Communism affected workers' individual self-understandings and their perceptions of their relationship with world history during the 1930s. Vivian Gornick's *The Romance of American Communism* (1977) remains the only study to take seriously and explore the impact of American Communism on individual psychology and explore the significance of the 30s American Left as a cultural community. Comparative literary scholarship may further an understanding of the relationship between Left ideology and individuals' understandings of their role within a cultural community by comparing, for example, the writing of Russian workers living under Communism with that of their American comrades who aspired to the same position. Having uncovered and assessed hundreds of Soviet workers' diaries from the 20s and 30s, Jochen Hellbeck argues that for many Soviet citizens, keeping a diary became a means of articulating, "an inner progression from old to new forms of thinking and being" as they felt that "the old, bourgeois personality inside of them had to die for the new socialist person to be born" ("Revolution on My Mind"). However, as Hellbeck argues, many individuals complained that the Party failed to provide clear guidelines on how to live as a model

Soviet citizen. Lacking clear instruction from the Party, these people turned to their own diaries and tried to define their own prescriptive ethics. In this respect, Hellbeck argues, the diaries could be described as “self-generating documents” through which these individuals’ sense of identity became transcribed (“Revolution on My Mind”). How, for instance, does this usage of writing as a means of political self-(re)generation compare with American political poetry or proletarian novels of the 1930s, in which poets such as Genevieve Taggard or Miriam Tane and novelists like Agnes Smedley tried to forge a revolutionary consciousness through literary praxis? This is just one example of the kind of question which the present study has enabled. It is important to stress that because poetry has been hypostatized within American literary history, and dissociated from political history, there is a particular need to engage in comparative analysis of American political poetry in relation to radical poetry internationally. While I have explored the way in which Taggard and Tane’s work engages with the issue of forging a radical consciousness by means of transformative poetic practices, further work can be done to compare their poetics with that developed by writers around the world. In particular, comparison of American poetry of the 1930s with that of Russian poets of the same period would help to undercut the critical tendency to dismiss American political poetry of the 30s as the dogmatic expression of an ultimately Moscow-led Communist doctrine, while failing to offer any constructive comparison of this poetry in relation to poetry of the Soviet Union. Such work would usher a new period of détente in an area of literary study still dominated by Cold War politics.

Alongside and within this international perspective, there is a need for further scholarship on working-class poetry. The attention which I give to working-class poetry in this study has been encouraged and influenced by the recently established discipline of New Working Class Studies. With roots in labour history and cultural studies, New Working Class Studies emerged in the United States in the 1990s. John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon discuss the history of the discipline in “What’s New About New Working Class Studies,” the first essay in the collection *New Working Class Studies* (1995) in which the main areas of political concern, scholarly enquiry and pedagogical interest which form the core of the discipline are outlined. Russo and Linkon argue that New Working Class Studies emerged as a result of Youngstown State University’s 1995 proposal to the “Diversity and Democracy” project of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, which “argued that class should be a central

element in the study and teaching of diversity” (6-7). The AAC&U’s support enabled the foundation of the Center for Working-Class Studies at YSU, the first such centre in the United States. The success of the CWCS led to the establishment of other centres and projects around the country, including The Center for the Study of Working Class Life at the State University of New York, and the Chicago Centre for Working Class Studies. The Working Class Studies Association is the principal professional organization which brings scholars in Working Class Studies together. In answering the question posed in the title of their essay, Russo and Linkon argue that what distinguishes scholars in New Working Class Studies from their disciplinary predecessors is that “we put the working class, in all its varieties, at the center of our work” (10). Rather than privileging class as a category of analysis, however, Russo and Linkon place class at the centre of their analysis because they understand class as “interwoven with other formative elements of society – race, gender, work, structures of power – and because we see class as the element that is often least explored and most difficult to understand” (12). The understanding of class articulated here by Russo and Linkon has been of foundational significance for the discipline as a whole.

From the very beginning of New Working Class Studies, moreover, both the analysis and creation of representations of working class life have been key concerns. Working class scholars, writers and artists have been engaged in exploring the intersections of class, race, gender and ethnicity, and in undertaking the important task of representing working-class lives, which so often would otherwise be denigrated or ignored. The creation and analysis of working-class literature has been at the heart of New Working Class Studies’ cultural engagement. Indeed, two scholars at the forefront of working-class literary scholarship in the United States, Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy, emphasise that “the working class is not only a class that works – that produces goods and services; it is also a class that produces culture, including literature” (Coles and Zandy xxiii). Russo and Linkon’s *New Working Class Studies* includes three essays which focus on working-class writing, including Paul Lauter’s “Under Construction: Working-Class Writing,” Jim Daniels’ “Work Poetry and Working-Class Poetry: The Zip Code of the Heart” and Tim Strangleman’s “Class Memory: Autobiography and the Art of Forgetting.” Lauter and Daniels’ essays both discuss the flourishing of working-class poetry in the United States since the 1980s, and assess the way in which this flourishing challenges some of the definitional assumptions made by readers and

scholars in relation to working-class literature. Lauter argues that “writers who see themselves and call themselves “working class” have been composing in every available genre, in a great variety of styles, and with many different objectives,” thereby destabilising any interpretative position which simply confirms its own set of assumptions, finding only what it deliberately seeks. Acknowledging that “there are no hard and fast lines between working-class art and other cultural forms,” Lauter’s essay makes clear that the lack of definitional stability surrounding working-class literature is conditioned by the uncertainties and instability of working-class lives. He argues that working-class writers force us to ask: “How do the distinctive *experiences* of working-class communities and their particular cultural traditions shape the forms and characteristics of literary expression?” and “How do these change over time as the conditions of life and of cultural production themselves change?” (“Under Construction” 64). Similarly stressing the way in which working-class literature necessarily reflects on the socio-historical conditions of its own production, Coles and Zandy state in the introduction to their anthology *American Working Class Literature* (2007), “Culture is, in Raymond Williams’ words, ‘a noun of process,’ and working-class literature particularly calls for attention to the process of cultural formation” (xxiv). Sharing this understanding of working-class literature as characterised by a concern for the conditions of its production, Daniels stresses the importance of refusing to police genre boundaries in relation to its study. Daniels establishes an initial distinction between “work poetry,” which is “written about a job” and “working-class poetry” as that which “deals with the effects of being working class on family life, relationships and so forth” (114). However, he then unsettles this tentative distinction by arguing that “the lines between them [work and working class poetry] are blurred. I prefer to keep them blurred; it’s no coincidence that a lot of working-class poetry is also work poetry” (114). Ultimately, he argues, work and working-class poetry are driven by a shared impulse, “to lift the veil, the curtain behind which our culture has often placed work and the lives of workers” (114). Instead of replicating the dominant tendency within literary scholarship to police genre distinctions, and isolate literature itself from the contingencies of everyday working-class experience, *New Working Class Studies* provides a framework in which scholars can resist reductive critical frameworks which serve only to isolate one area of life, thought and enquiry from another. In this respect, *New Working Class Studies* responds to Rukeyser’s political

plea “Not to let our lives be shredded, sports away from politics, poetry away from anything, anything away from anything” (qtd. in Kennedy-Epstein 7).

The methodology of this thesis was clearly informed by the desire not to let working-class poetry continue to be ignored, or appreciated only at one remove from American literary and political history more widely. Instead, I have explored one area of the relationship between poetic modernism, labour poetry and American political history. Despite the valuable work done by literary scholars working within New Working Class Studies including John Marsh, Nicholas Coles, Paul Lauter and Janet Zandy, much more work remains to be done in promoting awareness of and encouraging the reading and study of working-class poetry, and exploring the relationship between this poetry and American poetry more widely. In particular, more work needs to be done on assessing the relationship between American working-class and avant-garde poetry. This thesis has explored the relationship between Left modernism and labour poetry in the early decades of the twentieth century. Expanding our understanding of the way in which the history of American poetic modernism has been shaped by its relationship with political and labour poetry will provide the foundation for a fuller exploration of how this relationship developed in the post-war period, thereby ensuring that the study of American poetry does not continue to be ripped up into isolated shards of enquiry. In particular, there is a need for work which assesses the relationship between the political critique articulated in post-war and contemporary working-class and avant-garde poetry. How, for instance, does the critique of the relationship between poetry and materialism expressed by modern working-class poets like Mark Nowak or E R Carlin relate to that present in the work of Language poets such as Charles Bernstein or Bruce Andrews? Moreover, how does the interrogation of the relationship between poet, reader and community evident in avant-garde poetry relate to that found in much working-class poetry which, as in the work of poet Jeanne Bryner, uses poetry as a form of witness? Furthermore, how does the cultural opposition to capitalism expressed by working-class poets either compare or contrast with the understanding of the oppositional function of avant-garde poetics exemplified by Bernstein’s statement that “Poetry’s unpopularity, or anyway the unpopularity of the kind of poetry I want, is part of its cultural condition and so part of its advantage?... The elitism is not poetry’s, but commodity culture’s, which says that value comes exclusively from the market or audience share” (qtd. in Morris). To what

extent does the notion of a community of readership defined in opposition to market forces implied here in Bernstein's statement bear similarity with the oppositional, collectivist practices of writing, performance and reading manifested within contemporary working-class poetry? In contributing to a fuller understanding of the relationship between poetic modernism and labour poetry in the early twentieth century, my thesis shores up the foundations of such future research.

Ultimately, the need for further scholarship on working-class poetry is imperative. Otherwise, as the modern working-class poet Joseph Millar states, we will continue to "live so much of our lives/ without telling anyone" (qtd. in Daniels 133). Unless this work is done, the history of both working-class lives and poetry itself will remain only partially expressed. Furthermore, as Daniels argues, the flourishing of American working-class poetry since the 1980s provides an impetus for scholars "more systematically to pursue the project of recovering working-class expression from earlier moments," thereby ensuring that the present voice given to working-class experience resonates with the sound of past silences freshly breaking (133). Especially, there is a need for further recovery of women's political poetry of the early twentieth century, as a body of work which has fallen particularly into the gaps and unnatural silences that continue to mark American literary history. As literary scholars, we still have much work to do in exploring the harmonies and dissonances in American literature which emerge as a result of such recovery work. As Daniels argues, "hey, listen up!" (136). Future scholarship on modern and recovered working-class and political poetry will contribute to previously unimagined literary histories, and allow for newfound solidarity between present and past political and working-class poetic expression. A fuller account of the history of American political and working-class poetry remains unpublished, awaiting scholarly release.

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